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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

Website: salarnews.in | www.magzter.com | 27 DECEMBER 2024 | FRIDAY | BENGALURU | 24 JUMADA II, 1446 AH | Vol 4 | Issue No 331 | Pages: 8

Economic reforms architect Manmohan Singh no more

His quiet strength ensured progress for all & got India out of nuke isolation. History will remember him kindly

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Former prime minister Manmohan Singh, the architect of India's economic reforms, died here on Thursday night. He was 92. Singh's death was announced by AIIMS, Delhi, where he was admitted in the Emergency ward around 8.30pm.

AIIMS said "he was treated for age-related medical conditions and had sudden loss of consciousness at home" on 26 December.

He was one of the longest serving prime ministers from 2004 to 2014. He retired from the Rajya Sabha this year, ending his political innings here after 33 years. He is India's only Sikh prime minister. He was the finance minister from 1991 to 1996 in the PV Narasimha Rao government, a period marked by transformative economic reforms.

He was born on 26 September, 1932, in Gah, which is now in Pakistan. Having received his degrees from Oxford and Cambridge, he became the advisor to the Indian government, with several tenures at institutions, such as RBI and Planning Commission.

Thanks to Singh's policies, India ventured into the new economic world of devaluation of rupees, removal of trade barriers, and promotion of FDI or foreign direct investment.

He dismantled the license raj and brought in privatisation.

He steered India into an average annual GDP growth rate of about 8 per cent, fuelled by domestic consumption.

He also initiated NREGA, a National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, to beat unemployment.

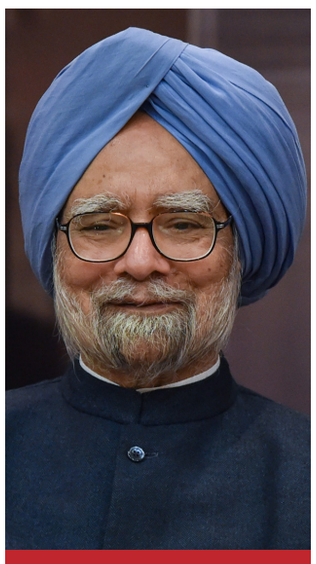
Infrastructure took off with better roads and telecom networks.

However, his life was not without criticism. Corruption scandals marred his government, despite which, he earned a reputation as a man of great personal integrity. He was known for his ability to build consensus in a fractious political landscape.

His tenure saw India bond with the US over the 2008 nuclear deal. He also consolidated India's position in international forums such as United Nations, G-20 and BRICS.

He continued peace talks with Pakistan and tried to end the border dispute with China, brokering a deal to reopen Nathu La pass into Tibet, which was closed for 40 years.

He is survived by wife Gurcharan Singh and three daughters. History will remember him for transforming India from a closed economy into one of the fastest-growing markets. *—PTI*



1932-2024

I LOST A MENTOR & A FRIEND: RAHMAN KHAN

BENGALURU, 26 DEC

Former Rajya Sabha deputy chairman K Rahman Khan on Thursday said he was devastated by the loss of Dr Manmohan Singh, a leader "who was more than just a Prime Minister to me". "He was a mentor, a guide and a steady force of wisdom and integrity."

As a minister in his cabinet and later as deputy chairman of Rajya Sabha during his tenure, Khan said: "I saw his leadership up close. He led with quiet strength, humility. His calm demeanour and intellectual brilliance were a source of inspiration and his ability to listen, guide and uplift those around him left a mark on me."

Ex-vice president Hamid Ansari with Dr Manmohan Singh and former Rajya Sabha deputy chairman K Rahman Khan **PHOTO: SALAR**

Singh's contributions were monumental. As prime minister, he presided over a decade of economic transformation. His visionary policies ranged from liberalisation to rural upliftment. He believed in inclusive growth and worked to ensure that India's progress reached every citizen. "India has lost a giant, and I have lost a mentor and a friend. His legacy will continue to guide us for generations." *—Salar News*

Annamalai vows not to wear shoes until DMK is dislodged

COIMBATORE, 26 DEC

BJP Tamil Nadu President K Annamalai on Thursday said he would not wear sandals and walk barefoot until the DMK regime is dislodged. Further, he said he would lash himself six times with a whip on 27 December at 10 am outside his residence here to draw people's attention over the tragic sexual assault of the Anna University student. Also it was to condemn the police, and the state government for its "apathy" in handling such matters. Addressing a press conference, Annamalai alleged that the accused, Gnanasekaran was a DMK office-bearer, which was denied by the ruling party. The BJP leader, showing photographs of the accused with DMK leaders, alleged that he was a ruling party's student wing office-bearer. BJP leader alleged that the accused committed the crime emboldened by his affiliation to the ruling party. Tamil Nadu BJP unit accused the state police of leaking the identity details of the Anna University sexual assault victim by making public the details of the FIR registered in the case. *—PTI*

China to make the largest dam near LAC on Brahmaputra

BEIJING, 26 DEC

China has greenlit the construction of what will be the world's largest dam on the Brahmaputra River in Tibet, close to the Indian border. This monumental project, estimated to cost USD 137 billion, raises significant concerns for riparian nations such as India and Bangladesh. The hydropower project, located in the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo River (the Tibetan name for the Brahmaputra), was announced by the Chinese government via state-run Xinhua news agency. It will be constructed in a remote gorge where the river makes a notable U-turn before flowing into Arunachal Pradesh and onward to Bangladesh. The dam's investment is set to exceed one trillion yuan, surpassing any previous infrastructure project globally, including China's own Three Gorges Dam. *—PTI*

Belagavi records 30th maternal death

BELAGAVI, 26 DEC

Belagavi district has recorded its 30th maternal death in just six months after a woman from Gokak died following childbirth on Christmas Day. Pooja, a resident of Kundaragi in Gokak taluk, gave birth to a baby boy on Wednesday but tragically passed away the following morning. Hospital authorities attributed her death to epilepsy, citing her health history and recent test results. However, Pooja's relatives have alleged negligence on the part of the hospital and have filed a complaint with the APMC police.

In addition to the maternal fatalities, the district health department reported that 322 newborns and infants have died since January 2024 for various reasons. District Health Officer Dr Shankarappa Gaded stated that maternal deaths have been linked to issues such as anaemia, pneumonia, low birth weight, and premature delivery. Dr Vithal Shinde, the district medical superintendent,

confirmed the 322 infant deaths, noting that 172 occurred at the Belagavi Institute of Medical Sciences (BIMS) alone. He explained that many infants are brought to government hospitals only in emergencies, following reports from private facilities indicating poor survival chances. This often leads to higher mortality rates, as the critical condition of these newborns is addressed too late.

Dr Shinde assured that all government healthcare facilities, including primary health centres, are committed to monitoring pregnancies and conducting timely interventions, including sonography, to reduce mortality rates for both mothers and their babies. *—Salar News*

AAP threatens to oust Cong from INDIA bloc

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has launched a fierce attack on the Congress, accusing it of colluding with BJP in the lead-up to the Delhi Assembly elections, scheduled for February. Delhi Chief Minister Atishi and AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh held a press conference where they alleged that Congress actions are undermining the unity of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA).

Singh claimed that despite AAP's silence during the Haryana elections, Congress appears to be following the BJP's agenda, with candidates like Ajay Maken allegedly targeting AAP leaders instead of

Atishi **PHOTO: PTI**

the BJP. He pointed out that while Arvind Kejriwal has faced an FIR, the Congress has not pursued similar actions against any BJP leaders. The AAP demands disciplinary action against Congress leaders within 24 hours, warning that failure to act may result in pushing for Congress's removal from the INDIA alliance. *—PTI*

CONG VOWS TO BRING IN YOUNG LEADERS IN PARTY OVERHAUL

BELAGAVI, 26 DEC

Congress on Thursday called for a major organisational overhaul, emphasising accountability and capability at every level, from the booth to the top. AICC President Mallikarjun Kharge advocated for the inclusion of young leaders in key positions.

It announced a 13-month-long political campaign, including padyatras, to raise issues such as the attack on the Constitution as well as concerns over price rise and corruption. Two resolutions were passed at the 'Nava Satyagraha Baithak', which was held in Belagavi to mark 100 years of Mahatma Gandhi holding Congress session in 1924.

It was attended by top Congress leaders, including Kharge and former party chief Rahul Gandhi, among others. Meanwhile, In her message read out at the Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting, Sonia Gandhi Asserting that Mahatma Gandhi has been and will continue to be the fundamental source of inspiration, Congress leader Sonia Gandhi said his legacy is under threat from those in power in Delhi and the ideologies and institutions that have nurtured them.

CM Siddaramaiah with Mallikarjun Kharge, Rahul Gandhi and DK Shivakumar during a march during the centenary of Congress session in Belagavi presided over by Mahatma Gandhi **PHOTO:SALAR**

Alleging that Constitution faces its "gravest threat yet", Congress said Home Minister Amit Shah's "denigration" of BR Ambedkar in Parliament is the latest instance of the RSS-BJP's decades-long project to undermine the Constitution.

In its political resolution, Congress Working Committee (CWC) reiterated the demand for Shah's resignation.

CWC said it is distressed by the "ongoing degradation" of democracy.

"Judiciary, Election Commission and media have been politicised through executive pressure. Parliament has been gutted," Congress said.

CWC alleged that Constitution's federal structure is under attack through 'One Nation, One Election bill'. CWC condemned the Centre's amendment to the Conduct of Election Rules 1961 undertaken on the recommendation of the Election Commission which restricts public access to poll documents.

It alleged that the way elections were conducted in Haryana and Maharashtra, have eroded the integrity of polls. CWC also expressed deep concern by the "state-sponsored increase in communal and ethnic hatred, particularly targeted against minority communities" especially in Manipur.

It claimed that the communal tension has deliberately been stoked in Sambhal and other places for the RSS-BJP's narrow po-litical gain.

The CWC demanded that a socio-economic caste census be conducted at the earliest.

"The 50 per cent ceiling on reservations for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and OBCs must be increased," it said. "The Modi government's economic policies are designed to enrich only a few of Modi's favourite business groups. Oligopolies in the economy are growing. ," the resolution said. The CWC demanded that the government use the upcoming Union Budget to provide income support to the poor and tax re-lief for the middle classes. *—PTI*

Cong flayed for excluding Gilgit, Aksai from map

BELAGAVI, 26 DEC

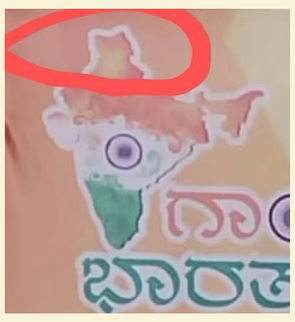
A controversy erupted over the alleged misrepresentation of the India map on the posters displayed by Congress to commemorate the centenary of 1924 Congress session in Belagavi, with BJP dubbing it as "vote bank" politics by the national party.

According to BJP and its ally JD(S), the map featured on the posters omits the Gilgit region of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir as well as the Aksai Chin region, currently under the Chinese administration, which are integral parts of Jammu and Kashmir.

Reacting to the controversy, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar, said the posters would be removed if there is any mistake.

In a post on 'X' BJP said, "RaGa's Mohabbat ki Dukaan is always open for China! They would break the nation. They've done it once. They'll do it again."

"@INCKarnataka, has shown utter disrespect for India's sovereignty by displaying a distorted map at their Belagavi event, portraying Kashmir as part of Pakistan!" the BJP Karnataka posted on 'X'. *—Salar News*



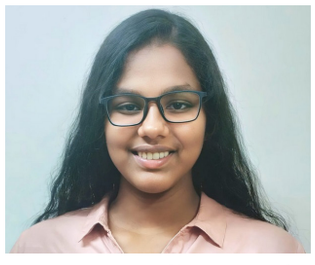
DAKSHINA KANNADA'S GEM

Parkinson's device: K'taka teen wins Bal Puraskar

HAMEED ASHRAF
BENGALURU, 26 DEC

A remarkable 15-year-old girl from Ullal, Mogaveera town in Dakshina Kannada, has garnered national attention with her innovative work in developing self-stabilising devices for Parkinson's patients and affordable prosthetics. Sindoora Raja has been awarded the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar, becoming one of 17 children to receive the Prime Minister's National Award from President Droupadi Murmu in New Delhi on Thursday.

"Science has always been my passion," said Sindhoora told **Salar News.** "I want to use technology to make lives better." "Being from a small town, accessing resources and mentorship was a challenge. However, my family's unwavering support and my thirst for knowledge propelled me forward," she said. Among her achievements, she has mentored students at the Junior World Science Scholars Programme in New York and has been selected to



represent India at the Regeneron International Science and Engineering Fair in 2025. Her AI model, designed while she was in class 10, calculates brain age and predicts the likelihood of neurodegenerative dis-eases like dementia and Alzheimer's. Sindhoora is passionate about robotics, mathematics, quantum mechanics, and computing. She is committed to positioning Karnataka at the forefront of innovation. Her mother, Shibani, expressed immense pride, stating, "Sindhoora's dedication is inspiring. Recognitions like these encourage the younger generation to dream big and innovate." *—Salar News*

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Bidar contractor dies by suicide, Priyank's aide blamed

BIDAR, 26 DEC

A 26-year-old contractor allegedly died by suicide by lying in front of a train in Bidar on Thursday, police said.

Sachin Panchal, a native of Tungadakatti in Bhalki Taluk of Bidar, had taken a contract in the Rural Development and Pancha-yat Raj Department.

In a suicide note, he alleged that former councillor Raju Kapanur and seven others were responsible for his death.

Kapanur is reportedly a close aide of Karnataka Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister Priyank Kharge.

Reacting to the incident, Kharge said, "I have just learned about it through the media. I am personally demanding an inquiry. We will ensure that the truth comes out. Whether my supporters or anyone else is involved, as this is the concerned depart-ment, nothing will be hidden."

He said, "I will have it investigated by my department, and if necessary, I will request the Home Minister to look into it."

When asked whether his close associate was | involved, he stated that he did not have complete information. *—Salar News*

T Narasipura to host 3-day Kumbh Mela from 10 Feb

MYSURU, 26 DEC

The Mysuru district administration and religious leaders have decided to organise the three-day 12th Kumbha Mela in T Narasipura town from 10 February. The decision was taken at a meeting held at Suttur Mutt near Chamundi Foothill in Mysuru. The meeting was attended by Suttur Mutt seer Shivarathreeshwara Deshikendra Swami, Adichunchanagiri Mutt seer Nirmalanandanatha Swami and Siddaganga Mutt's Siddalinga Shivacharya Swami and Somanatha Swami, Deputy Commissioner G Lakshmikantha Reddy, SP Vishnuvardhan, among others. —*Salar News*

PHOTO: FREEPIK

Speeding car knocks down motorist to death

BENGALURU, 26 DEC

A 38-year-old man died after his scooter was hit by an over-speeding car in Banashankari, Bengaluru. The deceased is Guru Dutt, a private firm employee and resident of Padmanabhanagar. The incident occurred around 8pm on Tuesday near the 10th Cross in Padmanabhanagar, when a speeding car collided with Guru Dutt's scooter. He sustained severe injuries and succumbed to his wounds while being rushed to a nearby hospital. Guru Dutt, originally from Shivamogga, was a well-known figure in his community. The Banashankari Traffic Police have conducted an inspection at the scene and are continuing their investigation into the incident. The body was handed over to the family after a post-mortem examination on Thursday, police officials confirmed. —*Salar News*

Family donates road accident victim's organs

BENGALURU, 26 DEC

A family on Wednesday donated the organs of a 48-year-old man, declared brain dead following a road accident. Manjunath V, a resident of Bengaluru, met with an accident on Mysuru Road on 14 December. He was rushed to BGS Gleneagles Global Hospital but declared brain dead on 16 December. With his family's consent and the state government's approval, the hospital's medical team harvested his organs for transplantation. "The family's bravery in the face of unimaginable loss highlights the noble impact that organ donation can have on countless lives," said Dr Smitha Thimaiah of BGS. Manjunath's liver and a kidney were transplanted to a patient from Assam. One kidney was sent to the Nephro-Neurology Department of Victoria Hospital in Bengaluru, while his heart was transported to Jayadeva Institute of Cardiovascular Sciences and Research. His corneas were also donated. —*Salar News*

Drunk driver costs school bus its registration

BENGALURU, 26 DEC

The KR Puram Regional Transport Office (RTO) has suspended the registration of an institutional bus belonging to the CMR University College after its driver was caught driving under the influence of alcohol. During a routine drunk-driving check near Hebbal Junction on 30 September, the Bengaluru Traffic Police (BTP) found that the driver of the bus was under the influence of alcohol. A case was registered against the driver under relevant sections, and the RTO in KR Puram was informed of the violation. In response, the RTO took stringent action by suspending the RC of the school bus, effectively prohibiting its operation. —*Salar News*

Cong is using public fund for its event: BJP

Will stage protest today, says Vijayendra

BENGALURU, 26 DEC

The BJP in Karnataka will stage a demonstration at the Mahatma Gandhi's statue in the State capital on Friday against the ruling Congress for allegedly spending public money to commemorate the centenary of the 1924 Congress session in Belagavi, the party said.

Addressing a press conference on Thursday, BJP state president BY Vijayendra said the Congress is no longer the same as it was before independence and termed it a "fake Congress".

"The Congress is organising a convention in Belagavi using crores of taxpayers' money, which is not right. We will hold a sit-in demonstration in front of the Mahatma Gandhi statue in Bengaluru on Friday," Vijayendra said.

He added that the agitation is also against the convention organised by the "fake Congress".

BJP MLAs and MLCs will participate in the agitation.

Vijayendra further said the Congress has discarded the principles of Mahatma Gandhi and BR Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution.

The Congress Belgaum Session was the only session presided over by Mahatma Gandhi.

Held on 26 and 27December, 1924, it stands as a pivotal moment in the Indian freedom struggle. —*PTI*

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, DyCM DK Shivakumar and others unveiled a Gandhi statue in Belagavi on Thursday **PHOTO: SALAR**

Fake Gandhis using Mahatma's name: HDK

'State Congress is Ali Baba & 40 thieves'

MANDYA, 26 DEC

JD(S) leader and Union Minister HD Kumaraswamy on Thursday said the present day Congress is not the "original" one, and fake Gandhis are doing politics in the name of Mahatma Gandhi.

Noting that Gandhi had called for the disbanding of the Congress, he slammed its state unit, terming it as the party of "Ali Baba and the forty thieves".

"Today the Congress leaders have gathered in Belagavi in the name of Gandhi to commemorate the centenary celebrations of the Indian National Congress session that was presided over by him. The government is spending crores of rupees on it, but I did not see Gandhi's cutout anywhere, instead of Gandhi, the fake Gandhis who are doing politics in the name of Gandhi. Their large scale cutout has been erected," Kumaraswamy said.

He said he has no objections to the programme being organised in the name of Gandhi, who has contributed to the freedom struggle and dreamt of real freedom for the people of the country. "What is the contribution of these people (Congress leaders)?" he asked. —*PTI*

CM Siddaramaiah, DyCM DK Shivakumar and others at the inauguration of a photo gallery, in Belagavi on Thursday **PHOTO: SALAR**

AICC Secretary Mansoor Ali Khan in Belagavi on Thursday; Belagavi roads were decorated with cutouts of Congress leaders **PHOTOS: SALAR**

Randeep Surjewala dubs BJP as modern-day East India Company

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Congress on Thursday said BJP is severely unnerved and peeved by events to celebrate 100 years of Mahatma Gandhi taking the reins of the grand old party in Belagavi and asked the ruling party at the Centre to stop making petty excuses.

Congress General Secretary In-charge of State Randeep Surjewala also dubbed BJP as the "modern-day East India company", which gets disturbed by the spread of the Gandhian ideology.

"The (Nathuram) Godse ideology, which shunned the Constitution and did not unfurl the tricolour for over six decades, should stop making petty excuses," Surjewala said, after BJP slammed Congress for displaying a map of India in its posters that did not include Aksai Chin in Jammu and Kashmir.

- Congress asked ruling party at Centre to stop making petty excuses

"They opposed Gandhiji when he was alive and they seek to annihilate his thought after he was assassinated by the same forces of violence and division. But let them not forget that Gandhi lives in the hearts of millions and shall continue to guide India and the world much beyond their vengeful times," the Congress leader said.

He said the Congress is celebrating the 100th year of Gandhi's Congress presidency and would continue to spread his ideology and follow his ideals, which the BJP would never understand or tolerate. —*PTI*

PRINCESS ROAD

Royal family opposes renaming KRS Road after CM

MYSURU, 26 DEC

Parliamentarian Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar on Thursday said attacks on him and the Mysuru royal family increased after he became MP.

He said the chief minister's name can be given to any roads in the city, but opposed the MCC's proposal to rename the KRS Road after Siddaramaiah, saying that it is named as Princess Road and has its own significance.

As princess Krishanajamanni and her daughters died from Tuberculosis, one of the sisters of the Maharaja of Mysuru Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar had constructed PKTB Sanitorium and Tuberculosis hospital on KRS Road in memory of her sister, Wadiyar said.

Since then, this stretch has been identified as Princess Road. There are mentions of this stretch as Princess Road since 1912 in postal records and Indian Railway Museum's official website. As this road has emotional connections with his Royal family, let the MCC name another road after CM Siddaramaiah, Wadiyar said.

Replying to his party's leader Pratap Simha's support to renaming the stretch after Siddaramaiah, he said, " I believe that the former MP has forgotten the history of Mysuru Kingdom."

Wadiyar said his family has become a target over disputes such as Kurubarahalli and the constitution of Srikshetra Chamundi Hills Development Authority.

Meanwhile, Chamaraja Congress MLA K Harishgowda said there is no question of going back from renaming the road after Siddaramaiah. —*Salar News*

Yaduveer Wadiyar **PHOTO: X**

BJP against good and bad: CM on road renaming

BELAGAVI, 26 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday took a dig at the BJP for opposing the Mysuru City Corporation (MCC) council's proposal to name a stretch of road in the city after him.

The MCC's proposal moots naming the stretch of KRS Road as Siddaramaiah Arogya Marga. "Will the BJP welcome it? Opposing things is their duty. They oppose both good and bad things," Siddaramaiah said.

Former BJP MP Mysuru Simha had supported the move, saying Siddaramaiah is a "son of Mysuru".

"The ex-MP (Prathap Simha) is from which party? What has he said? ...others say things, what to do?" the CM said, citing Simha's support to the proposal.

The MCC took the decision at its meeting on 22 November. The corporation placed the matter before the Mysuru deputy commissioner before presenting it in the council meeting.

BJP state president BY Vijayendra had posted on X, "Mysuru was built and developed by the Rajas and Maharajas of Mysuru. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah is going to name the road that was named after such a great royal family after himself. How valid and appropriate is this decision taken by the Mysuru City Corporation, which currently has no public representatives?"

Congress spokesperson MM Lakshmana welcomed Simha's statement defending the MCC decision. BJP has no moral right to oppose the MCC move when roads and streets are named after former CM BS Yediyurapa, who is accused in POCSO case, he said.

—*Salar News with Agencies*

Owner booked after Pitbull attacks 2-yr-old

BENGALURU, 26 DEC

A two-year-old girl sustained serious injuries after a Pitbull attacked her at Subbanapalya in Banaswadi, police said on Thursday.

The child's parents Nabraj and Anushka, both natives of Nepal, have filed a complaint at Banaswadi police station accusing the dog owner of negligence leading to the attack. They said on Monday, when Anushka was standing near their house holding her daughter, the dog attacked them. Despite Anushka's attempts to protect her child, the dog bit the girl, causing serious injuries. The parents stated that the girl is undergoing treatment at a hospital, with medical expenses crossing Rs 80,000. —*Salar News*

Full military honours accorded to 3 soldiers killed in J&K accident

BELAGAVI, 26 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday paid tributes to three soldiers from Karnataka, who were killed in an accident in Jammu and Kashmir on 24 December.

The deceased – Kundapura's Anoop Pujari, 33, Mahesh Nagappa Marigond, 25, from Bagalkote and Dayanand Thirakannavar, 44, from Belagavi – were among five soldiers killed after their vehicle plunged into a gorge in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district. They were from the 11 Maratha Light Infantry.

Their bodies were flown to Belagavi on Thursday where they were given military honour at the Maratha Light Infantry Regimental Centre. Brigadier Joydeep Mukharjee and other top rank military officials the chief minister to the ceremony.

He laid a wreath on the mortal remains of the soldiers and offered his tribute. The CM said he was "deeply pained" to learn about the deaths. —*PTI*

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah pays last respects to the soldiers who were killed in J&K accident, in Belagavi on Thursday **PHOTO: SALAR**

CYBER FRAUD

Japanese duped of Rs 35.5L following 'digital arrest'

BENGALURU, 26 DEC

A Japanese national, Hiroshi Sasaki, who works in Bengaluru, lost Rs 35.5 lakh after being 'digitally arrested' by cyber fraudsters, police said, on Thursday.

The incident occurred between 12 and 14 December, police added.

Sasaki, who lives in a flat near Dairy Circle, received a phone call on December 12. The caller was claiming to be from the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India. The caller informed him that his phone number would be blocked due to its unauthorised use.

To avoid the disconnection Sasaki was asked to dial a number.

Upon dialling the number, he was immediately connected to a WhatsApp call from someone claiming to be from the Cyber Crime wing of Mumbai Police. The caller informed Sasaki that he was involved in a money laundering case.

The fraudsters "digitally arrested" him and siphoned off Rs 35.5 lakh by having him make payments through various means, including RTGS.

He was also told that the money would be returned after the investigation was completed.

'Digital arrest' is a new cyber fraud, where the fraudster poses as law enforcement agency officials from agencies like CBI, and customs and threatens people of arrest by making video calls. —*PTI*

- The caller, claiming to be from TRAI, informed him that his phone number would be blocked due to its unauthorised use

PHOTO: PTI

Boys visit City to watch 'Pushpa 2', kidnapped

BANGARPET, 26 DEC

Four boys, aged 14 and 17, from Budikote and Bangarpet, were rescued by police after being held captive by a self-styled swami-Vishnu Rao in Bengaluru. The boys had travelled to the City on 21 December to watch the Telugu blockbuster 'Pushpa 2'.

After befriending the boys outside a theatre, Rao, who operates a fortune-telling shop nearby, took them to a lodge, locked them in a room and demanded ransom from their parents. He had already taken all their money and claimed he would perform a pooja on their behalf.

The parents of one boy alerted Bangarpet police, who quickly set up a trap. Posing as the parents, police contacted the kidnapper and tracked him down to Majestic.

The boys were rescued and returned to Bangarpet on 23 December. Circle Inspector Dayanand confirmed that the accused, Vishnu Rao, was arrested. —*PTI*

Cylinder blast: 2 Ayyappa devotees succumb to burns

BENGALURU, 26 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday announced a compensation of Rs 5 lakh each to the families of the two Ayappa Maladharis (devotees of Lord Ayyappa), who succumbed to their burns at the Karnataka Medical College and Research Institute (KIMS) on Thursday.

The two victims were among nine Ayyappa devotees staying in a room when an LPG cylinder caught fire, injuring them badly in Sainagar, Hubballi, on Monday. Hubballi-Dharwad Police Commissioner Shashikumar identified the deceased as Nijalingappa Bepuri, 58, and Sanjay Savadatti, 18, and said the seven other victims undergoing treatment were recovering. —*Salar News*

PHOTO: PTI

Didi to visit Sandeshkhali 1st time after protests

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday said she would visit Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas district on 30 December to chair a public distribution programme. This would be her first visit to the island since the area witnessed large-scale protests earlier this year over alleged land-grabbing and sexual harassment of women by local TMC leaders. "This will be a government programme. We have completed several pending programmes under 'Lakshmir Bhandar', 'Banglar Bari' and other schemes. —*PTI*

Cong MLA held for attacking cops in Gujarat protest

PATAN, 26 DEC

Gujarat Congress MLA Kirit Patel and 20 others were arrested on Thursday in connection with alleged assault on policemen during a protest at a university in the Patan district on 16 December, officials said. Patel, who represents the Patan constituency, ex-MLA of Siddhpur Chandanji Thakor and nearly 200 Congress workers and members of the party's student wing NSUI had protested at Hemchandracharya North Gujarat University over liquor consumption in the hostel. The next day, the Patan 'B' division police booked Patel and others for allegedly abusing and assaulting cops during the demonstration, officials said. While some of the accused were arrested, Patel and Thakor had been absconding, said Deputy Superintendent of Police KK Pandya. —*PTI*

1,000 new recruits to undergo special training: Biren

IMPHAL, 26 DEC

Nearly half of the 2,000-odd police recruits who completed their initial training in Assam this week will be put through a special commando training, Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh said on Thursday. Singh said the newly recruited personnel of the 10th and 11th India Reserve Battalion (IRB), who recently concluded training in Assam, would undergo specialised exercise so that they can be deployed for highway protection and handling the law-and-order situation. Singh said, "They will undergo specialised training at Pangei, where they will be taught how to handle law and order situation. If the personnel are deployed in various police stations now, their morale may be down. So, we decided to keep them at one place and use their services wherever and whenever needed," he said. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Court issues notice to Bhardwaj in defamation case

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

A Delhi court has issued notice to AAP leader Saurabh Bhardwaj in a criminal defamation case filed by a BJP worker. Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate Neha Mittal issued a notice to Bhardwaj in an order passed on 23 December, directing him to respond to a complaint filed by Suraj Bhan Chauhan by 9 January. Chauhan alleged that Bhardwaj had defamed him in 2018 by falsely claiming in a press conference that an FIR was lodged against him. The judge also gave a last opportunity to the complainant to file a copy of an earlier complaint case on the same issue which was dismissed by another court. —*PTI*

BJP got ₹2,600 crore donations, Cong ₹281cr: EC

AAP also received contributions of over Rs 11.06 crore

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

BJP received contributions of over Rs 2,604.74 crore during 2023-24 while the opposition Congress got Rs 281.38 crore in its kitty, according to contribution reports of the two parties put in public domain by the Election Commission (EC).

The donations listed in the reports were received till 31 March ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. The BJP had declared donations worth over Rs 740 crore ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, while the Congress had claimed to have received over Rs 146 crore in 2018-19.

During 2023-24, while the BJP received over Rs 723 crore worth of donations from Prudent Electoral Trust, it also got over Rs 127 crore from Triumph Electoral Trust and over Rs 17 lakh from Einzigartig Electoral Trust.

The Congress got over Rs 150 crore from the Prudent Electoral Trust, which was the sole trust donor to the party.

The contributions declared by the BJP and the Congress do not include the donations received through electoral bonds **PHOTO: X**

Interestingly, the Congress received multiple donations of Rs 1.38 lakh including those from top leaders including Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, K C Venugopal and Digvijaya Singh, among others.

Multiple donations were made to the Congress under the heading "Happy Birthday to our leader--JKB".

The contributions declared by the BJP and the Congress do not include the donations received through electoral bonds as these have to be declared in the party's annual audit reports and not contribution statements.

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which is also a recognised national party, received contributions of over Rs 11.06 crore during the fiscal.

CPI-M, received donations worth over Rs 7.64 crore.

National People's Part (NPP), which is the only recognised national party from the North East, got over Rs 14.85 lakh in its kitty.

The BJP was also a major beneficiary of electoral bonds purchased by big corporate groups like Vedanta, Bharti Airtel, Muthoot, Baja Auto, Jindal group and TVS Motors.

BJP also received Rs 3 crore through multiple donations from Future Gaming and Hotel Services Pvt Ltd owned by Santiago Martin, also known as the 'Lottery King' of India. He is under scanner of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and Income Tax (IT) department for alleged money laundering. —*PTI*

SFI members protest against the alleged sexual harassment of a student of Anna University in Chennai **PHOTO: PTI**

Accused in rape case not a DMK member: Minister

CHENNAI, 26 DEC

The accused in the varsity student sexual assault case is not even a primary member of the DMK, Tamil Nadu Law Minister S Regupathi said here on Thursday.

Gnanasekaran, the accused was arrested in a matter of five to six hours showing police's swift action and the government had no necessity to hide anything, he told reporters.

While the accused was not even an ordinary party member, some sections of media claimed as if he was an office-bearer of the students wing and it was wrong.

One photograph that purportedly showed the accused, close to Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin, was being circulated. It was clear that there was a gap between Gnanasekaran and the Dy CM, and it showed the picture was clicked by someone and such instances cannot be prevented, he added.

Opposition party AIADMK attempted to stage a protest here over the alleged sexual assault condemning the DMK government, and senior party leaders were detained by police.

BJP senior leader and former governor Tamilisai Soundararajan and others from the saffron party too were prevented by police from holding a demonstration.

She said she had every right to hold a protest and alleged that sexual crimes were on the rise and slammed police inaction. —*PTI*

TMC worker found dead in Nandigram, party blames BJP

KOLKATA, 26 DEC

The body of a Trinamool Congress (TMC) worker was discovered in Nandigram, located in West Bengal's Hooghly district, police reported on Thursday. The deceased, identified as 52-year-old Mahadeb Bishoi from the Gokulnagar panchayat area of Nandigram Block 1, was found in front of his tea stall within a market at Brindaban Chowk late on Wednesday night.

Preliminary investigations suggest that he was beaten to death, with both legs reportedly broken and visible injuries on his hands. A family complaint has been lodged, prompting an official investigation, according to a senior police officer. TMC has accused BJP workers of "murdering" Bishoi, demanding the immediate apprehension of those responsible. "He was a dedicated party worker. BJP supporters killed him. Just days ago, another party member was also killed. I call for stringent action against the perpetrators," Bappaditya Garg, president of TMC's Nandigram 1 block, told PTI.

BJP dismissed the TMC's allegations, asserting that Bishoi's death stemmed from internal party disputes rather than political rivalry. Meghnagh Paul, general secretary of the BJP's Tamluk unit, stated, "There is no political motivation behind this. A picnic took place yesterday where alcohol was consumed, leading to a fight that resulted in Bishoi's death." —*PTI*

BJP dismissed TMC's allegations, asserting that the death stemmed from internal party disputes rather than political rivalry **PHOTO: PTI**

UDDHAV REVIEWS PARTY POSITION FOR BMC POLLS

MUMBAI, 26 DEC

Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray on Thursday started a three-day exercise to assess his party's position in Mumbai, where civic polls are likely to be held next year, one of his close aides said.

After the split in the Bal Thackeray-founded Shiv Sena in 2022, the recently concluded assembly elections were seen as a litmus test for Uddhav Thackeray's party, which is a constituent of the opposition bloc Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA).

MVA performed poorly in the assembly elections, winning only 46, including 20 by Shiv Sena (UBT), of the state's 288 seats. Of the 36 assembly seats in Mumbai, Sena) contested in 21 constituencies and won 10. Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Anil Parab said, "Uddhav ji is taking stock of the poll preparedness of Sena in all 227 municipal wards of Mumbai. The deliberations will go on for three days." —*PTI*

FARMER PROTEST: SKM WRITES TO PREZ

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Amid ongoing farmers' protests and an indefinite hunger strike by farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, the Samyukt Kisan Morcha has written to President Droupadi Murmu seeking an appointment with her to discuss their issues on 25 December.

In a statement issued on Thursday, SKM said they wanted to address the situation surrounding Dallewal's hunger strike and other "pressing issues", including the introduction of a National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing.

The farmers have been demanding a legal guarantee on minimum support price for their crops.

SKM added that farmers from over 500 districts had submitted memoranda to the President through district magistrates, urging her "urgent intervention" to facilitate discussions between the Union Government and all farmer organizations on the long-standing demands.

Dallewal, 70, has been on a fast-unto-death at the Khanauri border since 26 November. According to doctors he is only consuming water and his condition is "critical." —*PTI*

TRANSPARENCY SOUGHT

Bypolls: SP seeks access to footage of booths

LUCKNOW, 26 DEC

The Samajwadi Party (SP) has submitted a memorandum to the chief electoral officer of Uttar Pradesh, demanding the release of CCTV footage and video recordings of candidates at polling booths in seven assembly constituencies where bypolls were held last month.

The constituencies include Katehari, Kundarki, Phulpur, Majhawan, Meerapur, Khair, and Ghaziabad, according to a statement issued by the party here.

The SP had lost all these seats in the 13 November bypolls.

The memorandum, highlighting the party's demand for transparency in the electoral process, was handed over by party representatives KK Srivastava, Harishchandra Singh, and Radheshyam Singh, the statement added.

Byelections to nine assembly constituencies were held on 13 November and its results declared on 23 November.

The SP had won the polls on two seats of Sishamau (Kanpur) and Karhal (Mainpuri). The BJP had won six seats while its ally RLD bagged one seat of Meerapur Muzaffarnagar).

The Centre last week tweaked an election rule to prevent public inspection of certain electronic documents such as CCTV camera and webcasting footage as well as video recordings of candidates to prevent their misuse.

Based on the recommendation of the Election Commission of India, the Union law ministry on 20 December amended Rule 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict the type of "papers" or documents open to public inspection. —*PTI*

Kejri inducts bodybuilders, wrestlers in AAP

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Several sportspersons, including wrestlers and bodybuilders, joined the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the presence of party Chief Arvind Kejriwal here on Thursday, giving a boost to the party ahead of the upcoming Delhi Assembly polls.

Kejriwal welcomed Tilakraj, Rohit Dalal and Akshay Dilawari, who are associated with sports and fitness, at the AAP office and handed party scarves and caps to them.

The former Delhi chief minister said around 70-80 bodybuilders and wrestlers have joined the party, adding it will associate the party more closely with health and fitness issues. He promised that after retaining power in the capital, the AAP will work towards resolving the issues faced by sportspersons.

Speaker of the outgoing Assembly Ram Niwas Goel said those who joined the AAP on Thursday have significant influence, and wanted to contribute to the party's mission.

The AAP is aiming for a third consecutive full term in the Delhi polls and hoping that this strategic outreach to sports and fitness professionals will resonate with voters.

Meanwhile, Leaders and members of the BJP Mahila Morcha staged a protest near Arvind Kejriwal's residence on Thursday, accusing him of "cheating" the women of Delhi with the 'Mahila Samman Yojana'.

BJP claimed that a similar scheme was announced by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) for Punjab Assembly polls but the women didn't receive Rs 1,100 per month. —*PTI*

AAP National Convener Arvind Kejriwal with people associated with the field of sports and fitness, in New Delhi on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

> BJP claimed that a similar scheme was announced by the Aam Aadmi Party for Punjab Assembly polls but the women didn't receive Rs 1,100 per month

AAP files ED plaint against BJP over money distribution

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh has lodged a complaint with the Enforcement Directorate (ED) against former BJP MP Parvesh Verma and ex-MLA Manjinder Singh Sirsa, accusing them of distributing cash to voters ahead of the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections in February. Singh alleged that Rs 1,100 was given to voters in AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal's constituency.

Singh expressed frustration at being unable to meet with ED officials to formally present his complaint, claiming that the agency operates solely to serve the ruling party's interests. He indicated plans to approach other agencies, including the Central Bureau of Investigation, Income Tax Department, and Election Commission. —*PTI*

APPRECIATING VALOUR

Prez confers Bal Puraskar on 17 kids for excellence in various fields

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday presented the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar to 17 children, recognising their exceptional courage and outstanding achievements across diverse fields, including art, culture, sports and innovation. Murmu underlined the importance of nurturing and celebrating young talents.

"Providing opportunities and recognizing children's talents has always been a part of our tradition. The honourees -- seven boys and ten girls selected from 14 states and Union territories -- were presented with a medal, certificate and citation booklet. Among them was Keya Hatkar, a 14-year-old author and disability advocate, recognized for her excellence in art and culture.

Despite living with spinal muscular atrophy, she founded initiatives like "IM POSSIBLE" and "SMA-ART," promoting inclusivity and disability awareness.

Ayaan Sajad, a 12-year-old Sufi singer from Kashmir, was honoured for his contributions to Kashmiri music, while 17-year-old Vyas Om Jignesh, who has cerebral palsy, was lauded for his dedication to Sanskrit literature, having memorised over 5,000 shlokas and performed in over 500 shows.

In bravery, Saurav Kumar, 9, was recognised for saving three girls from drowning, and 17-year-old Ioanna Thapa was honoured for rescuing 36 residents from a fire.

In the innovation category, 15-year-old Sindhoora Raja was awarded for creating self-stabilizing devices for Parkinson's patients, and cybersecurity entrepreneur Risheek Kumar, 17, was honoured for launching Kashmir's first cybersecurity firm.

Hembati Nag, a judo player from a Naxal-affected area was awarded in the sports category.

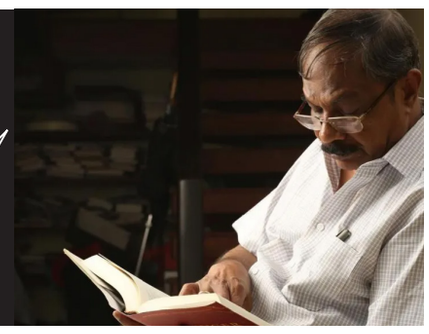
She overcame numerous challenges to win a silver medal at the Khelo India National Games. Chess prodigy Anish Sarkar, the youngest FIDE-ranked player at just three years old, was also honoured.

Meanwhile, speaking at an event on Veer Bal Diwas, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "These children have demonstrated what India's youth are capable of achieving. I extend my best wishes to all the winners on behalf of the nation."

He highlighted the role of youngsters in the nation's progress and called for adopting a futuristic approach to equip them with skills in technologies like AI and machine learning. —*PTI*

President Droupadi Murmu confers Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar to Om Jignesh Vyas, in New Delhi, Thursday. Vyas who has cerebral palsy, was lauded for his dedication to Sanskrit literature **PHOTO: PTI**

MT VASUDEVAN NAIR, A LITERARY LEGEND WHO CREATED TIMELESS CLASSICS



KOZHIKODE, 26 DEC

Legendary writer MT Vasudevan Nair, who passed away at a private hospital in Kerala's Kozhikode city on Wednesday evening, took Malayalam storytelling to remarkable heights, weaving narratives that beautifully captured the complex emotions of human life and the essence of Kerala's rural landscape.

A renowned writer, screenwriter, and filmmaker, MT, as he was affectionately called by his many admirers, significantly influenced the cultural imagination of Kerala and left a lasting impact that extended far beyond, becoming one of India's most beloved literary figures.

Born in 1933 in Kudallur, a small village in the Palakkad district of what was then the Malabar region under the British rule, MT was immersed in the serene beauty and rich traditions of Kerala's rural life during his formative years.

He spent his early childhood between Kudallur and his paternal home in Punnayurkulam, located in present-day Thrissur district, which gave him experiences that profoundly shaped his later literary works.

As the youngest of four siblings, MT's father, T Narayanan Nair, worked in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), allowing the young boy to soak in the rhythms of village life alongside his mother, Ammalu Amma.

This setting – a rich tapestry of ancestral homes, folklore, and evolving social norms – would lay the foundation for his literary sensibilities.

> As the youngest of siblings, MT's father, T Narayanan Nair, worked in Ceylon, allowing the young boy to soak in the rhythms of village life alongside his mother, Ammalu Amma.

Over a career that spanned more than seven decades, MT crafted a literary world that resonated with both everyday readers and intellectuals alike.

His first novel, Naalukettu (The Ancestral House), transformed Malayalam literature, offering a striking depiction of the decline of matrilineal joint-family systems.

In works like Randamoozham (The Second Turn), a retelling of the Mahabharata from Bhima's viewpoint, MT showcased his remarkable talent for humanising mythological characters and reinterpreting epic tales.

As a filmmaker and screenwriter, MT applied the same meticulousness and depth to Malayalam cinema, creating iconic films that blended literary excellence with visual storytelling. His directorial debut, Nirmalyam, remains a classic, having won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film. The tribute paid by prominent figures from the film industry, including Kamal Hasan, Mammootty, Mohanlal and Manju Warrier, reflected on their cherished association with the Jnanpith awardee. —*PTI*

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan pays his last respects to Jnanpith Award winning writer MT Vasudevan Nair, who died at his residence in Kozhikode, Kerala **PHOTO: PTI**

Death toll rises to 19 in R'than tanker fire case

JAIPUR, 26 DEC

The death toll in a tanker-fire incident in Rajasthan has gone up to 19 with another man succumbing to his severe burn injuries at the Sawai Man Singh (SMS) hospital here on Thursday. "Currently, 11 people are undergoing treatment at the hospital," he said, adding that two or three of them are likely to be discharged on Thursday. Lalaram, 28, who died on Thursday, had 60 per cent burn injuries and was on a ventilator. Three more patients are on ventilator support. The body has been shifted to the hospital's mortuary for post-mortem. —*PTI*

UP man beaten to death over land dispute

BAREILLY, 26 DEC

A 45-year-old farmer was allegedly beaten to death over an old land dispute in Fatehgaj area, police said on Thursday. The incident occurred on Wednesday night when Ahilkar, a resident of village Vandiya Khurd, was on his way to deliver food to his son at a field, said Fatehganj police station in-charge Inspector Santosh Kumar. At that time, some villagers stopped Ahilkar, hurled abuses at him and allegedly beat him with sticks before attacking him with sharp weapons, Kumar said.—*PTI*

Assam medico dies by suicide at AIIMS in Bhubaneswar

BHUBANESWAR, 26 DEC

A second-year MBBS student allegedly died by suicide at AIIMS-Bhubaneswar, police said on Thursday. The body of Ratnesh Kumar Mishra, 21, a resident of Dibrugarh in Assam, was found hanging from the ceiling fan in his hostel room on Wednesday, they said. Police suspect that financial crisis in his family led Mishra to take his life. Before hanging himself, he sent an audio message to his younger brother, requesting their father not to sell their land.—*PTI*

Rajasthan girl stuck in borewell for over 70 hours

JAIPUR, 26 DEC

Three-year-old Chetna has been stuck inside a narrow 150-ft deep borewell for over 70 hours as the rescue operations were still underway on Thursday to save the girl. Worried about her daughter's condition, Dholi Devi has not eaten anything since the tragic accident on Monday. Chetna fell into the borewell while playing in the agriculture farm of her father in Badiyali Dhani under Sarund police station of Kotputli-Behror district. With each passing moment, the hope for the girl being well is diminishing as the rescue team was not able to supply any food or water . Initially, efforts were made to pull the girl out of the borewell with a ring. —*PTI*

Law applies to film fraternity too: Revanth tells Tollywood

He promises to set up cabinet sub-panel to address problems

HYDERABAD, 26 DEC

There will be no compromise on law and order in the state and it applies to everyone including the film fraternity, Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy told a delegation of veteran actors and directors of the Telugu cinema industry on Thursday during a meeting here.

He also conveyed to the delegation, led by ace producer and Telangana Film Development Corporation (FDC) Chairman Venkata Ramana Reddy, that a Cabinet Sub-Committee will be constituted to resolve the problems of the film industry and suggested that they should also set up an in-house panel.

The meeting between the CM and the film personalities was held at the Police Integrated Command Control Centre here and comes in the wake of actor Allu Arjun's recent arrest that had led to speculations of 'strained' ties between the Congress-led state government and the cinema industry post the police action against the 'Pushpa' star.

CM Revanth Reddy with actor Nagarjuna during a meeting with directors, producers and actors of Telugu film industry in Hyderabad **PHOTO: PTI**

During the meeting, Revanth Reddy said the cinema industry is as important to the government as the IT and pharma sectors, sources said.

The CM said a cabinet sub-committee would be appointed to address the problems of the film industry and suggested the film fraternity also to form a panel to take up relevant issues. He said the government would take steps to attract Hollywood and Hindi filmmakers to the city. The government would organise a convention to encourage other film industries to come to the city, he said.

"Our intention is to take the (Telugu) industry to the next level," the sources quoted him as saying.

Revanth Reddy also said it is his responsibility as chief minister to implement the rule of law. He also pointed out that the film industry should remember its social responsibility and join the efforts to check drugs and other societal problems.

Leading film producer and Telangana Film Development Corporation Chairman Venkata Ramana Reddy, popularly known as Dil Raju, said besides Telugu movies, shootings of other languages, including Bollywood, Tamil and Kannada, are also taking place in Hyderabad. Meanwhile, six people who were arrested for allegedly trespassing into the residence of top Telugu actor Allu Arjun and engaging in vandalism are students pursuing PhD, post-graduation, and other courses. —*PTI*

IN SAMBHAL

Mrityu Kup's excavation begins

SAMBHAL, 26 DEC

The district administration in Sambhal on Thursday began the excavation and renovation of the ancient Mrityu Kup (well of death) at Kot Purvi, a locality under the jurisdiction of the Kotwali police station.

The initiative is part of a broader effort to identify and restore wells that are believed to hold religious and spiritual significance.

According to local residents, the well was abandoned several years ago and filled with debris. It is not only a historic landmark but also a sacred site where devotees believe they can attain salvation by bathing, the locals claim.

The Mrityu Kup is deeply embedded in the region's spiritual fabric, with local residents holding it in high regard for its mythological importance.

"Thursday marks the beginning of the excavation of the Mrityu Kup, a very ancient and revered site. The excavation is being carried out with the cooperation of the Nagar Palika. The well is immensely popular and its renovation will further strengthen our faith. The district administration has been highly supportive in ensuring the development of this important cultural and religious landmark," local councillor Gagan Varshney said. The structure is located close to the Shahi Jama Masjid, a court-ordered survey of which led to violence last month. —*PTI*

Cops: Tutor instigated Bihar students' protest

PATNA, 26 DEC

A Delhi-based tutor was held on Thursday on the charge of instigating aspirants who tried to "storm into" the Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC) office in Patna, demanding cancellation of its 13 December examination, an official said.

Patna's District Magistrate (DM) Chandrasekhar Singh told PTI that preliminary investigations into Wednesday's protests found that one Rohit, a tutor, mobilised and instigated the aspirants.

Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Rajeev Mishra said, "Initial investigations have revealed that Rohit had come from Delhi and brought along a number of persons, including girls, posing as disgruntled BPSC aspirants."

The source of their funding is also being investigated as they seem to be part of a larger conspiracy, he said.

Alleging irregularities in the 70th Integrated Combined Competitive Examination (CCE), aspirants demonstrated outside the BPSC office and sought re-examination. The police baton-charged the aspirants to bring the situation under control.

The protesters claimed they were treated "like terrorists" and many of them were injured in the police action, a charge which was denied by the authorities. Popular vlogger Motiur Rahman Khan, known as Guru Rahman, also joined the protests at Gardani Bagh.

The Opposition Congress and RJD condemned the police action, while Purnea MP Pappu Yadav said he would call a Bihar bandh on 1 January if the 13 December examination was not cancelled. —*PTI*

Chhattisgarh stops cops' hiring after suicide

RAJNANDGAON, 26 DEC

The Chhattisgarh government has cancelled a police recruitment drive in Rajnandgaon district and set up a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the suicide of a constable, alleging irregularities in the process, an official said.

Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Sharma, who holds the home portfolio, issued the order on Wednesday afternoon, the official said. "Irregularities have come to light in the ongoing recruitment process in the 8th battalion of Rajnandgaon. ," the official said. Since 16 November, candidates from Rajnandgaon, Khairagarh-Chhuikhadan-Gandai, Kabirdham (Kawardha) and Mohla-Manpur-Ambagadh Chowki districts have been participating in the recruitment process here, he said. —*PTI*

Shutdown in J&K against ropeway enters 2nd day, protesters launch hunger strike

REASI, 26 DEC

A shutdown in Katra, the base camp for the Vaishno Devi pilgrimage in Jammu and Kashmir, against a proposed ropeway project entered its second day on Thursday, with the protesters sitting on a hunger strike to press for the release of those detained by police the day before.

The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Sangharsh Samiti has called for a 72-hour shutdown, which commenced on Wednesday, announcing that all activities in Katra would remain suspended during the bandh. "The bandh will continue until the government shelves the ropeway project. It is an assault on the livelihoods of most Katra residents, who are dependent on the pilgrimage economy," a samiti spokesperson said. Last month, the board decided to install the ropeway to facilitate access to the temple for senior citizens, children and others who find it difficult to climb the 13-km-long track to the cave shrine. The samiti which claims to represent shopkeepers, pony operators and palanquin owners, claimed that the ropeway would destroy the livelihoods of local business owners and demanded that the project be scrapped. —*PTI*

Last month, the board decided to install the ropeway to facilitate access to the temple for senior citizens **PHOTO: PTI**

2004 INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI

Mom recalls birth of 'Tsunami' in snake island

PORT BLAIR, 26 DEC

Namita Roy was 26 years old when she gave birth to her son Tsunami in a snake-infested jungle where she and her family took shelter after deadly waves triggered by a massive earthquake devoured her home in Hut Bay Island in Andaman and Nicobar on this day in 2004.

Twenty years later, she remembers the day with a shudder. "I was busy with daily chores. Suddenly, I noticed an eerie silence and was shocked to witness the sea receding miles from our shore. Seconds later, there was a scary sound and tremors, and we saw a huge wall of sea waves gushing towards Hut Bay Island. I had a panic attack and fainted.

"Hours later, I regained consciousness and saw myself among thousands of locals deep inside a hilly jungle. Most parts of our island were devoured by the monstrous waves," Roy said.

Namita Roy, a survivor of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, with her son Tsunami Roy **PHOTO: PTI**

"I had labour pain but there was no doctor around. My husband pleaded with some women (to help me). With their help, I gave birth to Tsunami," Roy said.

"There was no food and I didn't have the courage to come out of the jungle, fearing the sea. My condition started deteriorating due to excessive blood loss. Somehow, I fed my premature baby to keep him alive. We spent four nights at Lal Tikri Hills in Hut Bay and were later rescued by defence personnel," she recalled.

Roy now lives in West Bengal's Hooghly district with her two sons Saurabh and Tsunami. Her husband Laxminarayan died during the Covid-19 pandemic. —*PTI*

Couple kills self over son's transgender lover

NANDYAL, 26 DEC

A couple allegedly died by suicide in Andhra Pradesh's Nandyal district after their 24-year-old son insisted on marrying a transgender person.

According to Nandyal sub-divisional police officer P Srinivas Reddy, Subba Rayudu, 45, and Saraswati, 38, took their lives after conflicts over the association of their son, Sunil Kumar, with the local transgender community.

Kumar has been in a relationship with a transgender person for three years and insisted that he would not marry any other person. He insisted on staying with his lover, leading to frequent quarrels with his parents.

PHOTO: X

Kumar had previously attempted suicide over the matter, police said on Thursday.

Investigation revealed that Kumar owed Rs 1.5 lakh to some members of the local transgender community, and they would publicly humiliate him demanding the money back. The insult compounded their distress and might have driven them to take the extreme step. The investigation is on, police said. —*PTI*

TRIBUTES POUR IN

People from the fishing community pay tribute to the victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami during a ceremony, at Pattinapakkam Beach, in Chennai on Thursday. Nearly 7,000 people died in Tamil Nadu ***PHOTO: PTI***

20 years of tsunami: Early warning among lessons learnt

On Boxing Day 2004, an earthquake in the Indian Ocean near Indonesia set off a tsunami which killed almost 2,50,000 people. It was the deadliest natural disaster this century, and was probably the deadliest tsunami in human history.

As coastal engineers who specialise in tsunamis and how to prepare for them, we have seen how the events of 2004 reshaped our global disaster management systems. Among the lessons learned since that day, three themes stand out.

First, the importance of early warning systems, providing time to escape impact zones. Second, the importance of local preparations and educating people about the risks. Finally, the ongoing need for – but not overreliance on – coastal defences.

The absence of a comprehensive early warning system contributed to the devastating loss of life in 2004. About 3,5,000 people died in Sri Lanka, for instance, which wasn't hit until two hours after the earthquake.

Significant investment has been made in the years since, including the Indian Ocean tsunami warning system which operates across 27 member states. This system was able to issue warnings within eight minutes when another earthquake struck the same part of Indonesia in 2012. Similarly, when an earthquake hit Noto, Japan, in January, swiftly issued tsunami warnings and evacuation orders undoubtedly saved lives. However, these systems are not in use globally and weren't able to detect the tsunamis that swept the Tongan islands in 2022 following the eruption of an undersea volcano in the South Pacific. But early warning systems alone are not enough. We still need education and awareness campaigns, evacuation drills, and disaster response plans.

This sort of planning proved effective in the village of Jike, Japan, which was hit by the Noto tsunami in January 2024. Having learned from a major tsunami in 2011 (the one that hit Fukushima nuclear power plant), engineers constructed new evacuation routes to tsunami shelters. Though the village was destroyed, residents evacuated up a steep stairway and no casualties were reported in Jike. In the years since the Boxing Day tsunami, countries at risk have invested in "hard" engineering defences including seawalls, offshore breakwaters and flood levees. While these structures offer a measure of protection, their effectiveness is limited. In Japan, the idea that hard measures can protect against the loss of life has been discarded, with the view that large-scale tsunamis can overwhelm even the most robust defences. For instance, in 2011, even a rubble breakwater followed by a five-metre-high wall could not protect the city of Watari. The tsunami covered half the city and hundreds of people died.

Rapid climate change is making sea levels rise and extreme weather, such as storms, more frequent which can make tsunamis worse ***PHOTO: PTI***

Tsunamis in the past decade or two have exposed vulnerabilities in existing protection strategies, with our field surveys showing breakwaters and other structures having suffered severe damage. Measuring inundation depth at a house damaged by the 2004 tsunami, during the authors' field survey in Polhena, Sri Lanka. Ravindra Jayaratne

Level two tsunamis are the big ones that any given bit of coastline might expect only once every thousand or so years: Indian Ocean 2004, Japan 2011. It is these tsunamis that critical infrastructure like power plants must prepare for. Nothing will entirely hold back a 2004-sized tsunami, but the goal is for structures to overflow without being destroyed. They should still be able to assist the evacuation process by reducing tsunami height and delaying the time it takes. Engineering advancements must also account for environmental consequences, including damage to ecosystems and disruption of natural coastal processes, with consideration given to nature-based solutions. Strengthening coral reefs with rock armour or heavy sandbags, and planting coastal forests as buffer zones may be a cheaper and more ecologically sensitive option than building high walls.

The progress is undeniable. However, tsunami and earthquake data still isn't shared widely around the world, and local authorities and experts often don't communicate the risk to residents of flood-prone communities.

Added to that, rapid climate change is making sea levels rise and extreme weather, such as storms, more frequent. This doesn't cause more tsunamis, but it can make them worse, and it does make "hard" defences less sustainable in the long term. *—PTI*

SALAR ساہر

India's 'Deep Sea Mission' on track: Scientists

India's Deep Sea Mission is on the right track, and the discovery of an active hydrothermal vent 4,500 metres below the surface of the Indian Ocean this month will boost scientists' confidence and provide valuable experience for further exploration, the country's top scientists have said.

In an interview with PTI, Thamban Meloth, Director of the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR), said this is just the beginning.

In a groundbreaking achievement, a team of Indian scientists from the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT) and the NCPOR captured the first image of an active hydrothermal vent located 4,500 metres below the surface of the Indian Ocean around a week ago.

This is a major milestone in India's ambitious Rs 4,000-crore Deep Ocean Mission, aimed at exploring uncharted depths of the ocean to find new minerals and life forms and improve understanding of the ocean's role in climate change.

"Seeing is believing," Meloth said.

"While we had already identified proof of both active and inactive hydrothermal vents (in the Central and Southwest Indian Ridges in the Southern Indian Ocean), we wanted to get visual images. That's what we achieved this time," he said.

According to Meloth, the discovery validates the investment in the blue economy and boosts scientists' confidence to continue exploring. It will play a crucial role in building expertise for future expeditions, he said.

"While we are excited about this success, there is much more of the Indian Ocean to explore. Sustained support is needed for further studies. We are building a new ship for such surveys, which will be ready in three years as part of the Deep Ocean Mission," the NCPOR director said.

Hydrothermal vents are like hot springs on the ocean floor. They form along mid-ocean ridges where tectonic plates move apart. The magma from the Earth's mantle rises to fill the gap and cools to form new crust and volcanic mountain chains.

When seawater seeps into the cracks in the crust, it gets heated by this magma and shoots back out, carrying dissolved minerals. As the hot water meets the cold seawater, these minerals solidify, creating chimney-like structures around the vents.

The first hydrothermal vent was discovered in 1977 on the Galapagos Rift in the eastern Pacific Ocean. Since then, scientists have discovered hundreds of hydrothermal vents across the world's oceans, particularly along mid-ocean ridges, back-arc basins, and other tectonically active regions.

Meloth said hydrothermal vents are important for two reasons. First, they produce valuable minerals like nickel, cobalt, and manganese, which are essential for modern technologies and clean energy solutions and second, they support unique life forms that thrive without sunlight, using a process called chemosynthesis to survive. Chemosynthesis allows organisms to convert inorganic molecules into energy using chemicals. By harnessing energy from inorganic compounds, these organisms can thrive and support a rich ecosystem in such areas.

At hydrothermal vents, the energy from the breakdown of hydrogen sulfide, a common compound in vent plumes, drives chemosynthesis, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The team relied on an Autonomous Underwater Vehicle, a self-programmed robotic instrument capable of smoothly navigating the rugged underwater terrain, capturing high-resolution images and collecting data.

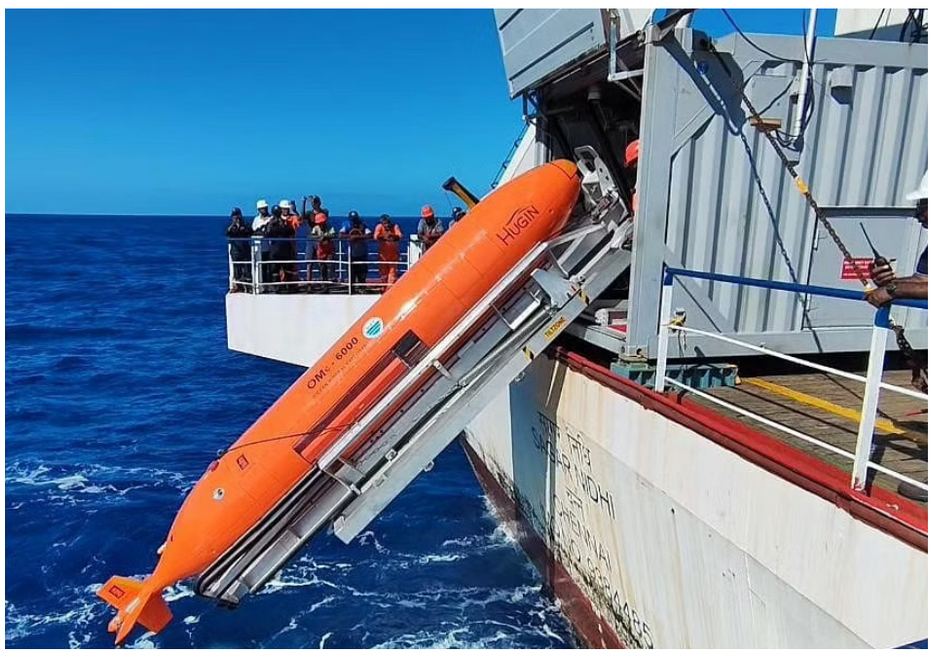
NIOT Director Balaji Ramakrishnan told PTI that India conducted four expeditions over the last two years in the region to locate the hydrothermal vent.

The scientists said that hydrothermal vents are not just mineral treasure troves; they are also cradles of unique ecosystems.

Unlike most life on Earth which depends on sunlight, deep-sea organisms rely on chemosynthesis, a process that uses chemicals like hydrogen sulfide to generate energy. Russian biochemist Aleksandr Oparin in 1922 proposed a chemosynthetic theory of the origin of life which says that "life might have originated at first on earth through a series of combinations of chemical substances in the distant past and it all happened in water".

Adding to the difficulty is the sheer scale of the search. Hydrothermal vents are often small, about one or two meters wide, scattered across thousands of km of ocean, he said.

"The instruments need to be incredibly precise to locate these vents. It requires a mix of experience and a bit of luck," Meloth added. *—PTI*



According to scientists, the discovery of an active hydrothermal vent 4,500 metres below the surface of the Indian Ocean will provide valuable experience for further exploration ***PHOTO: X***

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

When Indian designers took big strides by dressing up global stars

Remember saree-clad Kim and Khloe Kardashian turning heads at the extravagant Ambani wedding? And Jennifer Lopez channelling in her inner Queen Charlotte at her "Bridgerton"-themed birthday party this year?

From sarees to regal gowns, 2024 witnessed Indian fashion designers like Gaurav Gupta, Manish Malhotra, Sabyasachi Mukherjee and Falguni and Shane Peacock, making significant strides by dressing up some of the biggest names not just in Bollywood but also Hollywood.

"It's no secret that India is having a moment globally," Gupta, who has been the toast of the season with his dresses featuring prominently on international red carpet events, told PTI.

His outfits were picked up by Hollywood celebrities Mindy Kaling, Rebel Wilson, and Allison Janney for the 76th Primetime Emmy Awards in September, and "Bridgerton" star Nicola Coughlan for British Fashion Awards 2024 earlier this month.

"The increasing footprint of Indian designers globally reflects a significant shift in the industry's perception of Indian couture. It's no longer just about traditional wear but about blending innovation, craftsmanship, and cultural heritage with contemporary aesthetics," added Gupta.

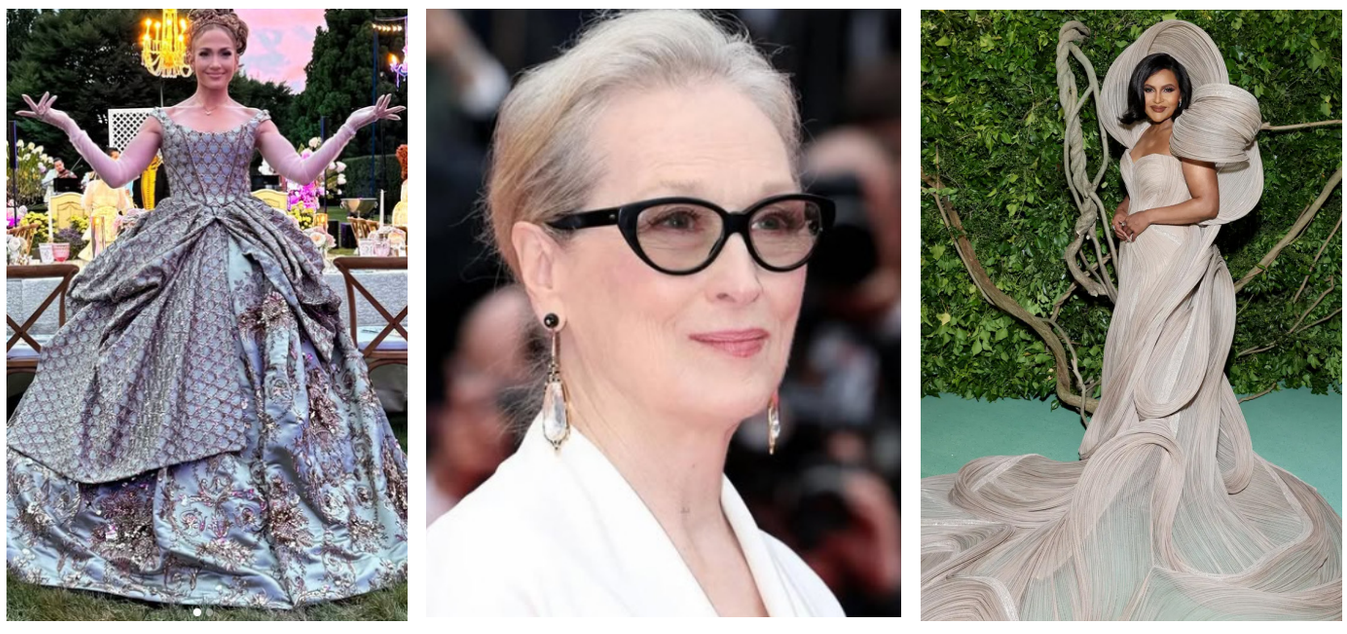
Another Indian designer who made headlines this year was Sabyasachi. Bollywood star Deepika Padukone chose his saree for BAFTA Awards where she presented an award and Alia Bhatt rocked another of his unique creations for her Met Gala debut. Bela Bajaria, chief content officer of Netflix, wore his design at the Emmys.

In July, American reality TV stars and sisters Kim and Khloe Kardashian wore Indian saree and lehenga-choli ensembles by Malhotra and Tarun Tahiliani for the grand wedding ceremony of Anant Ambani and Radhika Merchant in India.

Malhotra was also the go-to designer for Lopez who chose a custom-made gown to celebrate her "Bridgerton"-themed 55th birthday party.

Malhotra said each of the moments of creating these designs and seeing them come to life was "filled with creativity and excitement".

"It's always an amazing experience to collaborate with figures who have such a profound impact on fashion and pop culture. The process involves understanding their personal style, the event's essence, and crafting ensembles that not only captivate but also resonate with their personalities," he told PTI.



Jennifer Lopez in Manish Malhotra; Actress Meryl Streep wearing earrings by Indian designer Hanut Singh; Mindy Kaling in Gaurav Gupta ***PHOTOS: X***

Falguni Peacock, the one-half of the fashion label Falguni Shane Peacock, said their brand was a pioneer in designing for global personalities, including Nicki Minaj, Beyonce, and Kim Kardashian.

It's heartening to see colleagues following in their footsteps, added the designer, who recently dressed "Stree 2" star Shraddha Kapoor for her appearance at Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Film Festival 2024.

"We have dressed up Mariah Carey, who is an icon and there's a lot more coming up... It's great that India is on that platform and we have dressed everyone from Beyonce to Lady Gaga. It's good to see that everyone started dressing up (international celebrities) now. It's been 10-15 years since we started dressing them. Now, everyone is on it," Falguni Peacock told PTI.

What was the turning point when it comes to global celebs embracing Indian designers at important events, including the Met Gala, Oscars and Grammys?

For Malhotra, it was a natural progression fuelled by "a growing appreciation for the rich tapestry of Indian fashion and craftsmanship".

"It wasn't a single moment but rather a series of events where the unique allure of Indian design began to captivate global celebrities. When you look at Indian designs, there is an undeniable allure in the intricate handiwork, the vibrant textiles, and the unique ability to blend traditional aesthetics with contemporary flair.

"Celebrities, with their keen sense of style, started to recognise the timeless appeal and cultural depth that Indian designers bring to their creations. This gradual shift reflected a broader trend of embracing diversity and celebrating artistry from different corners of the world, ultimately leading to Indian fashion gracing prestigious red carpets and high-profile events with increasing regularity," added Malhotra.

"... when the fusion of traditional Indian elements with modern silhouettes captured the attention of the global fashion elite. For me, it was when I saw celebrities like Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and Priyanka Chopra making significant statements in Indian designers' creations at global events that I knew we had reached a pivotal moment," Gupta said.

Lopez, singer Rihanna, and Oscar winners Laura Dern and Meryl Streep were spotted wearing accessories designed by Sabyasachi and Hanut Singh at separate international events. *—PTI*

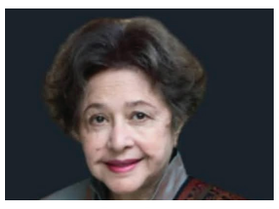


PHOTO: X

Author Bapsi Sidhwa dies at 86 in US

HOUSTON, 26 DEC

Celebrated novelist and pioneer of South Asian literature Bapsi Sidhwa, best known for her iconic novel Ice Candy Man, passed away on Wednesday at the age of 86 in Houston, US, her family confirmed. Her brother, Feroze Bhandara, announced that memorial ceremonies would be held over three days, followed by her last rites in Houston. Born on 11 August, 1938, in Karachi to a prominent Parsi family, Sidhwa moved to Lahore shortly after her birth, where she spent much of her life. She is regarded as one of Pakistan's most influential writers, with her works gaining global acclaim for their vivid depictions of history and culture. Her novel 'Ice Candy Man' later adapted into the critically acclaimed film Earth by filmmaker Deepa Mehta captured the horrors of the 1947 partition. The story, featuring a polio-stricken young girl observing the chaos, mirrors Sidhwa's own childhood experiences. The novel was included in the BBC's list of 100 most influential novels.

Sidhwa's literary debut, The Crow Eaters, also earned her widespread recognition for its portrayal of Parsi life and history.

She is also the author of several renowned novels, including cracking India, An American Brat, The Pakistani Bride, and Water. Her contributions to literature were recognised with Pakistan's prestigious Sitara-e-Imtiaz. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

'Baby Driver' actor Meek falls to death from car at 16

LOS ANGELES, 26 DEC

Hudson Meek, best known for playing the younger version of Ansel Elgort's character in Edgar Wright's 2017 action film, has died after falling from a moving vehicle. He was 16. Meek, whose credits also include 'MacGyver', 'The School Duet', 'The List' and 'The Santa Con', passed away on 22 December in Vestavia Hills, Alabama, reported local news site AL.com. According to the Meek's Instagram account website, the actor sustained "blunt force injuries after falling to the road from a moving vehicle" on 19 December. Meek was taken to a hospital where he died on Saturday night. Vestavia Hills police are investigating his death. *—PTI*

Ex-Taiwan prez candidate indicted in corruption case

TAIPEI, 26 DEC

Prosecutors in Taiwan indicted former presidential candidate and Taiwan People's Party founder Ko Wen-je on corruption charges Thursday, accusing him of taking bribes during his time as mayor of the island's capital. Ko, a former mayor of Taipei, is accused of accepting bribes related to a real estate development during his time in office, according to the prosecutors' statement. He's also accused of embezzling political donations. If convicted on all charges, he faces a possible 28.5 years in jail. Core to the case is a development owned by Core Pacific City group in Taipei. Prosecutors say Ko allowed the company to evade city building regulations in exchange for bribes. Ko, a former doctor, burst onto the political scene to win Taipei's 2014 mayoral race. Ko founded the TPP in 2019 as an alternative to the two-party system, promising a break from politics as usual.

He ran for President this year. Despite finishing third, he attracted attention for his appeal to young voters. *—PTI*

Russia suspected to have shot down Azerbaijan plane

Sources say Russia mistook the plane for an Ukrainian drone

BAKU, 26 DEC

Azerbaijan on Thursday observed a nationwide day of mourning for the victims of the air crash that killed 38 people and left all 29 survivors injured as speculation mounted about a possible cause of the crash that remained unknown.

As the official crash investigation started, theories abounded about a possible cause, with some commentators alleging that holes seen in the plane's tail section possibly indicate that it could have come under fire from Russian air defence systems fending off a Ukrainian drone attack.

Azerbaijan Airlines' Embraer 190 was en route from Azerbaijan's capital of Baku to the Russian city of Grozny in the North Caucasus on Wednesday when it was diverted for reasons yet unclear and crashed while making an attempt to land in Aktau in Kazakhstan after flying east across the Caspian Sea.

Cellphone footage appeared to show the aircraft making a steep descent before smashing into the ground in a fireball **PHOTO: X**

The plane went down about 3km from Aktau. Cellphone footage circulating online appeared to show the aircraft making a steep descent before smashing into the ground in a fireball. Other footage showed part of its fuselage ripped away from the wings and the rest of the aircraft lying upside in the grass.

On Thursday, national flags were lowered across Azerbaijan, traffic across the country stopped at noon, and signals were sounded from ships and trains as the country observed a nationwide moment of silence.

Speaking at a news conference Wednesday, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said that it was too soon to speculate on the reasons behind the crash, but said that the weather had forced the plane to change from its planned course.

"The information provided to me is that the plane changed its course between Baku and Grozny due to worsening weather conditions and headed to Aktau airport, where it crashed upon landing," he said.

Russia's civil aviation authority, Rosaviatsia, said that preliminary information indicated that the pilots diverted to Aktau after a bird strike led to an emergency on board.

Ukrainian drones had previously attacked Grozny, the provincial capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya, and other regions in the country's North Caucasus.

Some Russian media claimed that another drone attack on Chechnya happened on Wednesday, although it wasn't officially confirmed. *—PTI*

Security forces of the newly formed Syrian government question two men during a security checkpoint in Karm Az-Zeitoun, Homs, Syria **PHOTO: PTI**

14 cops killed by Assad's loyals: Syria

DAMASCUS, 26 DEC

Forces loyal to ousted Syrian President Bashar al-Assad ambushed and killed several Syrian police officers in Tartous governorate, posing a security challenge for the newly established administration just two weeks into its tenure.

Syria's new Interior Minister Mohammed Abdul Rahman said on Thursday that "remnants" of the Assad government in Tartous had killed 14 police members and wounded 10 others, vowing to crack down on "anyone who dares to undermine Syria's security or endanger the lives of its citizens".

The attack came as protests took place several cities after a video showing vandalising of an Alawite shrine in the city of Aleppo circulated online on Wednesday. Police had imposed curfews in Homs, Latakia, Jableh and Tartous until 8am. Al Jazeera could not confirm if the curfew has been lifted.

The interior ministry said on its official Telegram account that the video, which showed armed men walking inside the shrine and posing near human bodies, dated back to the rebel offensive on Aleppo in late November.

The ministry said that the violence was carried out by unknown groups, adding whoever was circulating the video now appeared to be seeking to incite sectarian strife.

State media reported that residents of Homs said that demonstrations in the city were led by members of the minority Alawite and Shia Muslim religious communities. Some said the demonstrations were linked violence in recent days aimed at members of the Alawite minority, a sect long seen as loyal to Assad, who was toppled by opposition fighters led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group earlier this month. *—Agencies*

S Korean Oppn moves motion to impeach acting President

SEOUL, 26 DEC

South Korea's main opposition party has submitted a motion to impeach acting leader Han Duck-soo due to his reluctance to fill three vacancies on the Constitutional Court ahead of critical deliberations involving impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol. The court is set to review rebellion charges stemming from Yoon's brief martial law decree issued on 3 December.

Political tensions are escalating as the opposition-controlled National Assembly pushes for the appointment of justices. Han, however, has reiterated that he will withhold these appointments without bipartisan agreement, a stance that National Assembly Speaker Woo Won Shik argues undermines the Assembly's authority.

Members of Yoon's People Power Party boycotted the vote, asserting that Han should not exercise presidential powers while Yoon remains in office. The opposition Democratic Party accused conservatives of manipulating the situation to protect Yoon's presidency. Their impeachment motion could see a floor vote as early as Friday, with Park Chan-dae, the party's floor leader, asserting that Han's comments reflect a failure to uphold the Constitution.

Yoon's presidential powers have been suspended following a 14 December Assembly vote, yet removing him from office requires approval from at least six of the nine Constitutional Court justices. Currently, three seats remain vacant.

Han, who has previously clashed with the Democrats over vetoes on various bills, maintains that stability should be prioritised during this political crisis. If impeached, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok would assume his responsibilities.

Han Duck-soo **PHOTO: X**

The impeachment process faces legal uncertainty, particularly regarding the standards required for an acting president. *—PTI*

Body found in wheel well of United Airlines

KAHULU, 26 DEC

Maui police are probing the discovery of a dead body in the wheel well of a United Airlines flight that landed in Maui. According to United, the body was found in the landing gear of flight 202, which arrived from Chicago on Tuesday. The Boeing 787-10's wheel well is only accessible externally, leaving authorities uncertain about how and when the individual accessed it.

The Maui Police Department confirmed they are "actively investigating" the incident. Further details have not been disclosed by either United or the police. Attempts to reach the state department of transportation for additional information were unsuccessful. *—PTI*

FIRE BREAKS OUT AT BANGLADESH SECRETARIAT, OFFICIAL DOCUS DAMAGED

DHAKA, 26 DEC

A massive fire broke out at a major building of the Bangladesh Secretariat in Dhaka on Thursday, damaging official documents that prompted authorities to form a high-powered investigation committee amid suspicions that it could be an act of sabotage.

The fire broke out in Building 7 of the Bangladesh Secretariat and it was brought under control after nearly six hours of firefighting efforts.

According to officials, the fire broke out Thursday early morning in the nine-storey building housing seven ministries inside the high-security complex.

Officials said a power outage causwwed by the fire forced as well other ministries apart from the building to halt their normal work while security agencies restricted entry inside the complex preventing many staff and officials from entering into the complex at the central part of the capital. *—PTI*

Israeli strike kills five journalists in Gaza

DEIR AL-BALAH, 26 DEC

An Israeli airstrike claimed the lives of five Palestinian journalists outside a hospital in the Gaza Strip early Thursday, according to the Health Ministry. The strike occurred near Al-Awda Hospital in the densely populated Nuseirat refugee camp, where the journalists were working for the Quds News Network, which also reported on the incident.

The Israeli military stated that the strike targeted a group of militants from Islamic Jihad, an armed organisation allied with Hamas. The assault follows the deadly incursion by Hamas into southern Israel on 7 October, marking the beginning of the ongoing conflict.

Since the onset of hostilities, the Committee to Protect Journalists indicates that over 130 Palestinian journalists have been killed. Meanwhile, Israel has restricted access for foreign reporters in Gaza, allowing only military embeds.

The Health Ministry reports that Israel's air and ground offensive has resulted in more than 45,000 Palestinian fatalities. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

'UKRANIAN AGENDA'

Russia arrests 4 for plot to kill top officers

MOSCOW, 26 DEC

Russia's top security agency said Thursday that it has arrested several suspects accused of involvement in an alleged Ukrainian plot to assassinate senior military officers, an announcement that follows the killing of a top Russian general last week.

The Federal Security Service, a top KGB successor known under its Russian acronym FSB, said in a statement carried by Russian news agencies that it had arrested four Russians accused of making preparations to kill senior Defence Ministry officials.

The FSB said that the suspected organisers of the attacks were planning to kill one of the senior officers using a remotely controlled car bomb. It added that another top military official was to be assassinated by an explosive device hidden in an envelope. The agency didn't name the military officers who were targeted in the alleged plot.

The action comes after Russian Lt Gen Igor Kirillov died as his building (in pic) was blown up by a bomb hidden in a scooter **PHOTO: X**

The statement follows the death of Lt Gen Igor Kirillov who was killed on 17 December by a bomb hidden on an electric scooter parked outside his apartment building as he left for his office. Kirillov's assistant also died in the brazen attack that was claimed by Ukraine and brought the conflict once again to the streets of the Russian capital.

The FSB has arrested a suspect, a citizen of the Central Asian nation of Uzbekistan, and claimed that he said that he had been recruited by Ukrainian special services.

Russian President Vladimir Putin described Kirillov's killing as a "major blunder" by Russia's security agencies, noting they should learn from it and improve their efficiency. *—PTI*

TICKET SALES SUSPENDED

Japan Airlines under cyberattack, flights delayed

TOKYO, 26 DEC

Japan Airlines (JAL) confirmed it experienced a cyberattack on Thursday, leading to delays for more than 20 domestic flights. The airline reassured passengers that flight safety remained unaffected.

The disruption began in the morning when JAL's network, linking internal and external systems, began to malfunction. In total, 24 domestic flights faced delays of over 30 minutes, with potential for further complications as the day progressed.

Kyodo News Service reported that JAL informed the police it believed the incident to be a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack, which inundates networks with data from multiple sources, overwhelming them in a short timeframe.

Japan's major travel season is set to intensify this weekend as offices close for the New Year celebrations, a time when millions head back home **PHOTO: PTI**

In June, Japan's space agency said it had suffered a series of cyberattacks since 2023, though sensitive information related to rockets, satellites and defence was not affected. It was investigating to take preventive measures. Last year, a cyberattack paralysed operations at a container terminal at a port in the city of Nagoya for three days.

As a precaution, JAL temporarily suspended ticket sales for both domestic and international flights scheduled for Thursday departures. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi stated at a regular press conference that the transport ministry urged JAL to expedite system restoration efforts and assist affected passengers.

Television footage highlighted many travellers at Tokyo's Haneda airport experiencing delays, coinciding with the peak year-end holiday travel season.

Japan's major travel season is set to intensify this weekend as offices close for the New Year celebrations, a time when millions head back to their hometowns from urban centres. *—PTI*

Finnish-Estonian power cable outage sparks probe

FRANKFURT, 26 DEC

A power cable linking Finland and Estonia under the Baltic Sea suffered an outage, prompting an investigation, Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said Wednesday.

Writing on X, Orpo said that power transmission through the Estlink-2 cable stopped Wednesday and that authorities were "investigating the matter." He said the interruption would not affect electricity supplies in Finland.

Estonian network operator Elering said there was enough spare capacity to meet power needs on the Estonian side, public broadcaster ERR said on its website.

Authorities have been on edge about undersea infrastructure in the Baltic. Two data cables, one running between Finland and Germany, the other between Lithuania and Sweden, were severed in November. Germany's Defence Minister said officials had to assume the incident was "sabotage," but without providing evidence or saying who might have been responsible. The remark came during a speech in which he discussed hybrid warfare threats from Russia.

The Nord Stream natural gas pipelines that once brought natural gas from Russia to Germany were damaged by underwater explosions in September 2022.

The cable was down for much of this year to repair damage from a short circuit that may have been caused by the cable's complex positioning, ERR reported. *—PTI*

Petteri Orpo **PHOTO: X**

PHOTO:X

Gold rises to ₹78,850 per 10g; silver climbs ₹300

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Gold prices increased Rs 250 to Rs 78,850 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid a firm global trend, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The yellow metal had settled at Rs 78,600 per 10 grams on Tuesday. Silver extended its rally for the third straight session by climbing Rs 300 to Rs 90,800 per kg on Thursday. The metal had ended at Rs 90,500 per kg in the previous close. The commodities market was closed on Wednesday on the occasion of Christmas. The price of 99.5 per cent purity advanced Rs 250 to Rs 78,450 per 10 grams from the previous close of Rs 78,200 per 10 grams. Traders attributed the climb in gold prices to firm trends in the overseas markets which aided in bullion prices.—*PTI*

CCPA fines 3 UPSC coaching institutes for misleading ads

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) has imposed penalties totalling Rs 15 lakh on three coaching institutes for making misleading advertisements about their success rates in civil services examinations, the government said on Thursday. Vajirao & Reddy Institute and StudyIQ IAS were each fined Rs 700,000, while Edge IAS was penalised Rs 100,000 for deceptive claims regarding their results in the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) Civil Services Examinations of 2022 and 2023, an official statement said. Vajirao & Reddy Institute claimed "617 selections out of 933" in the 2022 examination, while StudyIQ IAS advertised "120+ selections" in 2023. —*PTI*

Archies ties up with Al Hasnae Gifts to expand in GCC mkt

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Greeting cards and gifts major Archies Ltd on Thursday said it has partnered with Al Hasnae Gifts to expand in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) market. Archies had recently commenced operations in the UAE. Through the collaboration it plans further expansions into Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, establishing a robust presence across the Middle East, the company said in a regulatory filing. The GCC region is a dynamic market with immense potential, and we are excited to bring Archies' signature gifting range to a new audience," Archies Executive Director Varun Moolchandani said. This partnership ensures a robust supply chain, enhanced market reach, and a seamless shopping experience for customers, both in-store and online, the company said. —*PTI*

Akums inks pact worth ₹1,760 cr for European market

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Contract development and manufacturing organisation, Akums Group on Thursday said it has entered into a strategic long-term agreement at an estimated value of 200 million euros (Rs 1,760 crore) with an undisclosed global pharma firm for manufacturing and supply of formulations in the European market. Under this collaboration, Akums Group will produce and supply multiple Stock keeping units of oral liquid formulations, which the partner company will market across various European countries, the company said in a statement. "The total value of this agreement is estimated at Rs 1,760 crore. Akums will get an upfront payment of 100 million euros (Rs 880 crore) for product development and site approval from European authorities," it added.—*PTI*

Rupee drops to all-time low, closes at 85.27 against USD

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, rises 0.56%

MUMBAI, 26 DEC

The rupee stayed weak for the third straight session and fell 12 paise to settle at a fresh all-time low of 85.27 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, amid a strong greenback and rising crude oil prices.

Forex traders said, increased month-end as well as year-end dollar demand from importers and fear of an aggressive import tariff by the Donald Trump administration lifted the American currency.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened weak at 85.23 and touched the lowest-ever level of 85.28 against the greenback during intraday trade.

The unit finally ended the session at its lifetime low closing level of 85.27 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a loss of 12 paise from its previous close.

The rupee fell 4 paise to settle at 85.15 against the US dollar on Tuesday, a day after losing 9 paise on Monday.

Dollar index was trading at lower by 0.09 per cent **PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA**

The forex market was closed on Wednesday for Christmas.

According to Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, the rupee fell to a fresh all-time low on strong dollar and rising US treasury yields that are at the highest levels in seven months.

Also, he said the surge in crude oil prices, month-end/year-end dollar demand and FII outflows may also weigh on the rupee.

"However, any intervention by the RBI may support the rupee at lower levels. Traders may take cues from weekly unemployment claims data from the US. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of 85.10 to 85.45," Choudhary added.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading marginally lower by 0.09 per cent but remained elevated at 107.93, amid soaring US Treasury yields (4.61 per cent) and the fear of delayed interest rate cuts by the US Federal Reserve.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.56 per cent to USD 73.99 per barrel in futures trade.

In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex closed almost flat at 78,472.48 points, while Nifty inched up 22.55 points, or 0.10 per cent to close at 23,750.20 points.—*PTI*

SENSEX DIPS 0.39 POINTS

Mkt closes flat amid lack of global triggers

MUMBAI, 26 DEC

Benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended flat in listless trading on Thursday amid a lack of near-term triggers and unabated foreign fund outflows.

The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex dipped 0.39 points to settle at 78,472.48 in a muted trade. During the morning trade, it had jumped 425.5 points or 0.54 per cent to 78,898.37.

The NSE Nifty eked out gains of 22.55 points or 0.1 per cent to 23,750.20 on the monthly expiry day.

From the 30 blue-chip stocks, Titan, Asian Paints, Nestle, Tech Mahindra, Reliance Industries, Zomato, Larsen & Toubro and Bajaj Finserv were among the laggards.

Adani Ports, Mahindra & Mahindra, Maruti, Sun Pharma, Bharti Airtel and Tata Motors were among the gainers.

"On the last expiry day of the year, the domestic market remained flat throughout the day amidst holidays in peer markets and a lack of major domestic or global triggers. Auto shares saw gains from recent corrections.

"However, concerns over FII outflows and the depreciating rupee persist, given the strengthening US dollar index and worries about potential adverse tariffs and concerns over rate cuts in 2025, held the muted market trend," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

Among sectoral indices, the BSE services jumped 1.80 per cent, auto climbed 0.81 per cent, power (0.45 per cent), healthcare (0.45 per cent), realty (0.39 per cent) and consumer discretionary (0.23 per cent). —*PTI*

India probes 'dumping' of LPG fuel tanks from China

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

India has initiated a probe into alleged dumping of LNG fuel tanks from China following a complaint by a domestic player, according to a commerce ministry notification.

The commerce ministry's investigation arm, Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR), is probing the dumping of liquefied natural gas LNG fuel tanks as imports are allegedly hurting the margins of the domestic industry.

Inox India Ltd has filed an application seeking the imposition of anti-dumping duty, stating that the cheap imports are causing material injury to the domestic industry.

The tanks are used to contain and carry methane gas in large vehicles such as trucks.

"On the basis of the duly substantiated written application submitted by the domestic industry and having reached satisfaction based on the prima facie evidence submitted by domestic industry about dumping of subject goods...the Authority, hereby, initiates an anti-dumping investigation," the DGTR has said in a notification.

If it is established that the dumping has caused material injury to domestic players, the DGTR would recommend the imposition of anti-dumping duty on these imports. The finance ministry takes the final decision to impose duties.

PHOTO:X

Anti-dumping probes are conducted to determine whether domestic sectors have been hurt because of a surge in cheap imports **PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA**

Anti-dumping probes are conducted by countries to determine whether domestic industries have been hurt because of a surge in cheap imports.

As a countermeasure, they impose these duties under the multilateral regime of the Geneva-based World Trade Organization (WTO).

India has already imposed anti-dumping duty on several products to tackle cheap imports from various countries, including China. —*PTI*

India's global trade share doubled since 2005: Report

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

India's stake in global trade has experienced remarkable growth over the past twenty years, with its export and import shares doubling, according to a recent report from the National Stock Exchange (NSE).

The report indicates that India's share of global merchandise exports increased from 0.9 per cent in 2005 to 1.8 per cent in 2023, while services exports surged from 2 to 4.3 per cent during the same period. Consequently, India's total export share grew from 1.2 to 2.4 per cent. This expansion can be attributed to various factors such as robust trade agreements, a diversified export portfolio, enhancements in logistics infrastructure, and government initiatives, including the Make in India campaign and the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme.

India places 16th worldwide in merchandise exports and

PHOTO:X

ranks seventh in services exports, which comprise 43.8 per cent of the nation's total exports—the highest proportion among major economies, surpassing the global average of 24.7 per cent.

The report also notes an increase in India's import share, with merchandise imports rising from 1.3 to 2.8 per cent and services imports increasing from 2.4 to 3.4 per cent.

The last decade has seen a slowdown to a CAGR of 3.3 per cent, attributed to weakened global demand and geopolitical tensions. —*ANI*

'Housing sales volume falls 4% in top 7 cities'

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Housing sales are estimated to fall 4 per cent this year in seven major cities to nearly 4.6 lakh units on lower launches, while sales in value terms are up 16 per cent to Rs 5.68 lakh crore, according to Anarock.

Average housing prices grew 21 per cent this year across the seven major cities on rising rates of land, labour and some building raw materials.

Anarock, which is one of the leading housing brokerage firms in India, attributed the fall in sales volumes during 2024 to a drop in new launches of housing projects because of a delay in regulatory approvals amid general and assembly elections. Appreciation in prices helped sales to grow in value terms during this year. Overall sales value of housing units saw a 16 per cent annual growth to Rs 5.68 lakh crore from Rs 4.88 lakh crore in the preceding year. —*PTI*

10 Adani stocks settle higher; Adani Ports jumps 5%

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Ten of the 11 listed Adani group firms ended higher on Thursday, with Adani Ports soaring over 5 per cent, in an otherwise tepid equity market trend.

Shares of Adani Ports jumped 5.19 per cent, emerging as the biggest gainer among the Sensex stocks.

The stock of Adani Green Energy rallied 3.22 per cent, Adani Energy Solutions shot up by 2.67 per cent, Adani Power climbed 2.25 per cent, Sanghi Industries climbed 1.75 per cent, Adani Enterprises advanced 1.23 per cent, Ambuja Cements (1.23 per cent), ACC (0.75 per cent), Adani Wilmar (0.33 per cent) and Adani Total Gas (0.08 per cent) on the BSE.

However, shares of NDTV declined 0.52 per cent.

- The combined market valuation of all the 11 firms stood at Rs 12, 98,249.11 crore

The combined market valuation of all the 11 firms stood at Rs 12, 98,249.11 crore.

The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex dipped 0.39 points to settle at 78,472.48 in a muted trade. The NSE Nifty eked out gains of 22.55 points or 0.1 per cent to 23,750.20. —*PTI*

BYD slams reports of poor conditions at Brazil factory site

BANGKOK, 26 DEC

A spokesperson for Chinese automaker Build Your Dreams (BYD) has objected to reports about poor conditions at a construction site in Brazil where it is building a factory, saying the allegations were aimed at "smearing" China and Chinese brands.

Earlier in the week, a task force led by Brazilian prosecutors said it had rescued 163 Chinese nationals it said were working in "slavery-like" conditions at the site. A video from the Labour Prosecutor's Office of dorms housing the workers showed beds with no mattresses and rudimentary cooking facilities.

Meanwhile, reacting to the reports a BYD spokesperson, Li Yunfei, vehemently objected in a statement posted Thursday on his Weibo social media site. —*PTI*

Banking frauds rise in H1FY25, amount involved jumps 8 times: RBI report

MUMBAI, 26 DEC

The number of bank frauds witnessed a significant on-year increase in the first half of the current fiscal to 18,461 cases and the amount involved jumped more than eight-fold to Rs 21,367 crore, according to RBI data released on Thursday.

The Reserve Bank of India has released the Report on Trend and Progress of Banking in India 2023-24 which presents the performance of the banking sector, including commercial banks, co-operative banks and non-banking financial institutions, during 2023-24 and 2024-25 so far.

The report said the number of frauds during April-September stood at 18,461 involving Rs 21,367 crore compared to 14,480 cases involving Rs 2,623 crore in the comparative period of the last financial year, based on the date of fraud reporting.

It further said frauds present multiple challenges for the financial system in the form of reputational risk, operational risk, business risk and erosion of customer confidence with financial stability implications.

- Based on the date of occurrence of frauds, in 2023-24, share of internet and card frauds in the total stood at 44.7 per cent in terms of amount and 85.3 per cent in terms of number of cases

Regarding 2023-24 fiscal as a whole, the RBI said that based on date of reporting by banks, the amount involved in frauds was the lowest in a decade, while the average value was the lowest in 16 years.

Based on the date of occurrence of frauds, in 2023-24, the share of internet and card frauds in the total stood at 44.7 per cent in terms of amount and 85.3 per cent in terms of number of cases.

In 2023-24, the number of fraud cases reported by private sector banks (PVBs) accounted for 67.1 per cent of the total. In terms of amount involved, however, public sector banks (PSBs) had the highest share of card and internet frauds was highest for all bank groups in 2023-24.

Instances of penalty imposed on regulated entities (REs) increased during 2023- 24 across all bank groups, except foreign banks and small finance banks. —*PTI*

34% RISE IN SEARCHES

Ambani impact? Weddings budgets soar again

NEW DELHI, 26 DEC

Weddings in India, often said to be made in heaven, are becoming increasingly lavish on Earth, with couples keen to celebrate their unions in style. Following the extravagant Rs 5,000-crore marriage of Mukesh Ambani's son Anant to Radhika Merchant, demand for wedding services has surged.

According to a report by Justdial, metropolitan cities witnessed a 34 per cent increase in wedding service searches, with New Delhi leading with a notable 44 per cent rise. Year-on-year, wedding budgets rose by 6.7 per cent, averaging Rs 35.6 lakh, as indicated by a survey from WedMeGood, which serves 1.8 million users monthly.

The Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) reported a significant rise in average wedding spending from Rs 20 lakh in 2022 to Rs 30 lakh in 2024. Gold, an essential part of wedding traditions, saw imports increase fourfold to USD 14.86 billion in November, driven by surging demand.

Gold saw imports increase fourfold to USD 14.86 billion in Nov **PHOTO: PTI**

Gold prices have risen from Rs 63,500 to around Rs 80,000 per 10 grams this year, prompting buyers to consider alternatives like lab-grown diamonds.

Moreover, destination weddings are regaining popularity, with 26 per cent of weddings now held outside couples' hometowns, a marked increase from 21 per cent in 2023. As couples seek unique experiences, spending is shifting towards immersive designs and innovative services.

Industry experts predict that the wedding services market could expand from Rs 1 lakh crore to Rs 3.5-4 lakh crore in the next five years. Though spending is high, it will depend on hospitality prices, particularly for venues and catering, which constitute about 60-70 per cent of wedding budgets. —*PTI*

RBI sets up 8-member panel on ethical use of AI

MUMBAI, 26 DEC

The Reserve Bank on Thursday announced the setting up of an eight-member committee to develop a framework for responsible and ethical enablement of artificial intelligence (FREE-AI) in the financial sector.

Headed by IIT Bombay professor Pushpak Bhattacharyya (Department of Computer Science and Engineering), the panel will assess the current level of adoption of AI in financial services, globally as well as in India.

It will also review regulatory and supervisory approaches on AI with focus on the financial sector globally.

The panel will also identify potential risks associated with AI, if any, and recommend an evaluation, mitigation and monitoring framework and consequent compliance requirements for financial institutions, including banks, NBFCs, FinTechs, PSOs, etc.

The other members of the panel are: Debjani Ghosh (Independent Director, Reserve Bank Innovation Hub); Balaraman Ravindran (Professor and Head, Wadhwani School of Data Science and AI, IIT Madras); Abhishek Singh (Additional Secretary, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology); Rahul Matthan (Partner, Trilegal); Anjani Rathor (Group Head and Chief Digital Experience Officer, HDFC Bank); Sree Hari Nagaralu (Head of Security AI Research, Microsoft India); and Suvendu Pati (CGM, FinTech Department, RBI).

—*PTI*

Record-setting 87,242 fans flock to MCG for Test match

MELBOURNE, 26 DEC

A record 87,242 spectators filled the stands at the iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground on the opening day of the Boxing Day Test between India and Australia, setting a new mark for the highest single-day attendance in a five-day match between the two teams. The tickets for the opening day of the fourth Test had been sold out over two weeks ahead of the clash. —*PTI*

PHOTO: ANI

Gill dropped in team's best interest: Nayar

MELBOURNE, 26 DEC

India's assistant coach Abhishek Nayar on Thursday defended axing Shubman Gill from the Boxing Day Test, saying it was in team's best interest to not only have Rohit Sharma back to his usual opening slot but also add some sting to the attack by drafting in spin all-rounder Washington Sundar. Gill, who missed the first Test due to a finger injury, scored 31 and 28 in the Pink Ball Test and looked the most assured among Indian batters. He, however, got out for a duck in Brisbane. With Rohit Sharma opening the innings and KL Rahul coming at No. 3, Gill had to make way for a third specialist all-rounder in Washington. He justified why playing Washington at the MCG made sense ahead of Gill.—*PTI*

PHOTO:X

Andy Pycroft marks 100th test as match referee

MELBOURNE, 26 DEC

Former Zimbabwe captain Andy Pycroft on Thursday became only the fourth official in the history of men's Test cricket to complete 100 games as a match referee with the Boxing Day contest between India and Australia that began here on Thursday. The exclusive list is led by former Sri Lanka player Ranjan Madugalle as the most experienced match referee with 225 Tests, followed by New Zealand's Jeff Crowe (125) and England's Chris Broad (123). The 68-year-old Pycroft played three Tests and 20 ODIs for Zimbabwe from 1983-1992. "Pycroft, who has also officiated in 238 men's ODIs, 174 men's T20Is and 21 women's T20Is since 2009, said he has enjoyed every minute of the journey," the ICC said. —*PTI*

PHOTO:X

Erigaise looks to qualify for 2026 Candidates Tourney

NEW YORK, 26 DEC

Grandmaster Arjun Erigaise will have to tackle obstacles to retain his chances of becoming the first Indian to enter the 2026 Candidates' tournament when he opens his campaign at the World Rapid and Blitz chess tournament here. Erigaise, who currently trails Fabiano Caruana of the United States in the list of players slated to qualify from 2024, will have a tall order to win the World Rapid chess championship that gets underway here. It may be noted here that the last time an Indian won the crown was in 2019 when Koneru Humpy triumphed and in 2017 Viswanathan Anand had defied all odds to win the title. —*PTI*

Kohli slapped with fine over Konstas face-off

The shoulder bump leads to exchange of words; 19-yr-old debutant played it off as accident

MELBOURNE, 26 DEC

Virat Kohli and Australian youngster Sam Konstas were on Thursday involved in a physical altercation because of which the Indian superstar was fined 20 per cent of his match fee and handed a demerit point even though it was played down as an accidental bump by the 19-year-old debutant.

The brief showdown took place after the 10th over of the Australian innings on the opening day of the fourth Test here when the players were crossing over. Kohli and Konstas bumped shoulders while moving across the pitch in the face off that was initiated by the travelling star.

Kohli was eventually charged with breaching Level 1 of the ICC Code of Conduct.

After the physical contact, both players quickly turned around to glance at each other and engage in a heated exchange of words before Usman Khawaja stepped in. The on-field umpires also had a word with the two and things cooled down rather quickly.

Speaking to reporters after stumps, Konstas said Kohli bumped into him but it wasn't deliberate.

"I was just doing my gloves and I think he accidentally bumped me. I think that's just cricket and can happen with tension," said the teenager.

Yeah, definitely it was premeditated (the attack against Bumrah) especially with the pace but just trying to keep my head still and just watch it as hard on my back. But yeah, got a few away today and changed the field, which was good, and then trying to bolster my zones

-Sam Konstas, Aus Opener

Former Australian skipper Ricky Ponting blamed Kohli for instigating the exchange.

Former India head coach Ravi Shastri, who was at the helm during Kohli's captaincy, said the run-in was unnecessary. "There is a line and you don't want to overstep that line. You know Virat is a senior player, he has been captain of the side," he said on 'Fox Sports'. —*PTI*

Virat Kohli and Sam Konstas bumped shoulders while moving across the pitch in the face-off that was initiated by the travelling star **PHOTO: X**

Shastri hails Konstas' brazen batting

MELBOURNE, 26 DEC

Sam Konstas tore the MCC coaching manual to shreds with his brazen batting approach and flippant treatment of an intimidating Jasprit Bumrah, former India coach Ravi Shastri said on Thursday, adding that the Australian teenager reminded him of legendary Virender Sehwag.

Konstas, 19, grabbed eyeballs with his scintillating batting on Test debut. He had the Indian camp in disbelief with his bold ramp shots off Bumrah, one of the most revered fast bowlers in modern-day cricket.

"I don't think anyone's taken or treated Bumrah like that in any format of the game, let alone red-ball cricket," Shastri told Star Sports.

"For him to go out there with that swag and attempt some outrageous shots—it was something else. He tore that MCC coaching manual to shreds."

Shastri said at one point, it felt like "India had run out of ideas". —*PTI*

Bumrah keeps battle alive; Konstas shines bright

MELBOURNE, 26 DEC

Jasprit Bumrah's knack of coming up with magic deliveries in crunch situations kept India alive after Australia's top-order, headlined by teen debutant Sam Konstas' stroke-filled half-century, guided the hosts to 311 for 6 on the opening day of the fourth Test here on Thursday.

If Konstas' audacious 60 off 65 balls enthralled the near sell-out crowd of over 80,000 at the MCG during a humid morning session, Bumrah's (3/75 in 21 overs) deception of length to dismiss Travis Head (0) also had its takers as chants of 'Boom, Boom, Booooomraaaaaaah' reverberated through the stands.

In the 67th over, he removed an out-of-form Mitchell Marsh (4), having got Usman Khawaja (57 off 121 balls) with the half-tracker in the post-lunch session.

The first two sessions, however, belonged to Australia with Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne (72 off 145 balls) and Steve Smith (68 batting, 111 balls) scoring half-centuries.

The final session was all about Bumrah magic. The Indian spearhead didn't let the hosts completely walk away with the game which they threatened to do at one stage.

He now has 24 wickets in the series. With Mohammed Siraj (0/69 in 15 overs) off-colour, Bumrah didn't have much support save off-spinner Washington Sundar (1/37 in 12 overs), who bowled a containing line.

Even Ravindra Jadeja (1/54 in 14 overs) leaked runs despite getting Konstas out and Nitish Reddy, the batting all-rounder, was only used before the second new ball was taken.

'Sam Jams at the G'

The morning was owned by the precocious 19-year-old from New South Wales.

Konstas didn't show any nerves during his scintillating knock, which comprised of two sixes off Bumrah.

In fact, Bumrah was hit for a six for the first time in a Test since Cameron Green hit him for one back in 2021.

The way he attacked the Indian bowling with gusto gave Khawaja a chance to get back to form with a patient half-century.

The duo added 89 runs in such quick time.

For Konstas, it all began with a few play and misses off Bumrah's opening over but as soon as the teenager got his first couple of runs, things changed dramatically.

The fearlessness of youth stood out on the big stage as Konstas pulled off the lap-scoop against Bumrah before smashing him over mid-on for another maximum.

The fans and experts alike were forced to think the last time Bumrah (1/50 in 15 overs) was hit for two sixes in his first spell of a Test match. They couldn't because it never happened in a first spell.

The stump mic caught Bumrah saying "Beginner's Luck" but Konstas seemed to have enough wares to answer his probing queries. —*PTI*

Indian women eye clean sweep against West Indies

VADODARA, 26 DEC

India's women's cricket team is poised to secure a clean sweep in their ODI series against the West Indies as they prepare for the third and final match on Friday. Following a challenging series against Australia, the team has found success on home soil, consistently scoring over 300 runs in their encounters with the West Indies.

Pratika Rawal, who has stepped in as an opener alongside Smriti Mandhana, showed noticeable improvement in her second ODI after a modest debut. Her ability to hit over the boundary raises hopes as she replaces Shafali Verma in the line-up. Harleen Deol, who scored her first ODI hundred in the previous match, is keen to maintain her momentum, having achieved a strike rate above 100.

Captain Harmanpreet Kaur is looking for a substantial innings, benefitting from her regained fitness and the team's series victory providing her with the freedom to play aggressively. On the bowling front, Renuka Thakur has been instrumental in leading the pace attack with promising support from young bowler Titas Sadhu. Leg-spinner Priya Mishra has also made an impressive mark in her early career.

Following a challenging series against Australia, the Indian team has found success on home soil **PHOTO: X**

In contrast, the West Indies, under the captaincy of Hayley Matthews, must improve after conceding high scores in both matches. With Matthews being the only player to make a significant impact thus far, the team will need to elevate their game to challenge India effectively. —*PTI*

BOXING DAY TEST

Bosch claims wicket with first ball on debut against Pak

CENTURION, 26 DEC

Fast bowler Corbin Bosch made an unforgettable entrance into Test cricket, claiming a wicket with his very first delivery as South Africa faced Pakistan on Boxing Day.

Bosch dismissed Pakistan captain Shan Masood for 17, luring him into a loose drive that was caught in the slips, leaving Pakistan at 88-4 at lunch on a seam-friendly SuperSport Park pitch. This early breakthrough heralded a rapid decline for the visitors, who lost four wickets for just 20 runs.

Unbeaten at the break were Kamran Ghulam on 23, who notably struck a top-edged six, and Mohammad Rizwan on 10. Prior to Bosch's introduction, Masood and Saim Ayub had shown promise, negotiating the pace of Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen.

However, Bosch's debut ignited a collapse as Dane Paterson also picked up key wickets, including that of Babar Azam (4).

South Africa's Corbin Bosch lured Pakistan captain Shan Masood into a loose drive that was caught in the slips **PHOTO: X**

Left-hander Saud Shakeel (14) fell shortly after, caught down the leg-side off a short ball from Bosch.

Both teams opted for four fast bowlers each, disregarding a specialist spinner at a venue favouring pace.

South Africa leads the World Test Championship table and requires a win in either of the two Tests against Pakistan to secure a place in next June's final at Lord's. —*AP*

- Both teams opted for 4 fast bowlers each, disregarding a specialist spinner at a venue favouring pace

Santosh Trophy: Bengal beat Odisha to reach semis

HYDERABAD, 26 DEC

West Bengal defeated neighbours Odisha 3-1 to qualify for the semi-finals of the 78th National Football Championship for the Santosh Trophy here on Thursday.

Odisha had a bright start to the game as Rakesh Oram put them in the lead in the 25th minute.

Bengal found the equaliser at the stroke of half time through Narohari Shrestha and struck twice more via Robi Hansda (70th) and substitute Manotos Maji (90+2nd) to enter the semifinals for the 52nd time. Hansda's ninth goal of the campaign saw him pull further away in the goal-scorers chart.

For record champions West Bengal, tackling adversity was the one challenge they did not expect from this game, against a team that had qualified for the knockouts.

Yet, Odisha became the second team to breach the Bengal defence in the Santosh Trophy this season, with Oram scoring the first goal of the day in the 25th minute through a header off a corner by Bikash Kumar Sahoo.

Odisha's luck finally ran out in the final minute of the first half when seasoned forward Shrestha drew Bengal level with a firm right-footer.

West Bengal for their part were profligate with the ball, and especially in the final third. —*PTI*

CAPTAIN SPEAKS

'HIL will boost women's hockey team'

ROURKELA, 26 DEC

Harmanpreet Singh, captain of the Indian men's hockey team, expressed confidence that the inaugural Hockey India League (HIL) for women will significantly benefit their national side, just as it did for the men's team on their journey to Olympic success.

This year's HIL features eight teams in the men's tournament, while the women's event will see six teams compete for glory. Reflecting on the success of the men's team, which won back-to-back Olympic medals after a 50-year drought, Harmanpreet highlighted the invaluable experience gained through the league.

Captain Harmanpreet Singh said Hockey India League for women will propel the women's team to new heights in the future **PHOTO: X**

"The impact of the HIL can be seen to this day in the Indian Men's Hockey Team. Our success in the Olympics stems largely from the exposure we received at a young age through the league," he stated.

"Training and competing alongside top players improved our game immensely," the captain of the Indian men's hockey team said.

With the introduction of the women's league, Harmanpreet is optimistic that it will propel the women's team to new heights in the future. "I am certain that with the Women's HIL commencing, it will help the Indian Women's Hockey Team achieve greater things," he added.

In a related note, Harmanpreet, who was recently acquired by Soorma Hockey Club for Rs 78 lakh, has become the most expensive player in HIL history. —*PTI*